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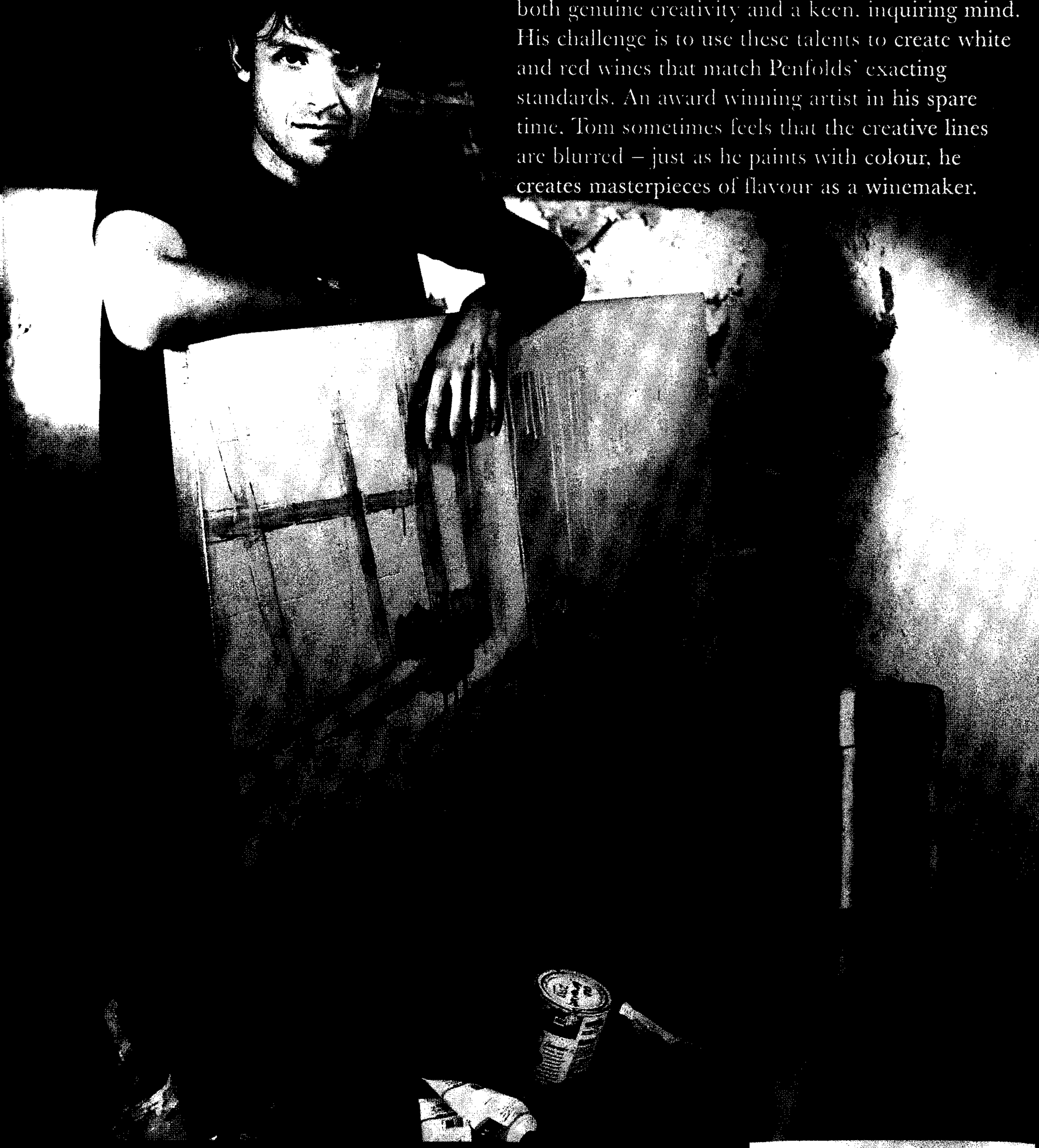

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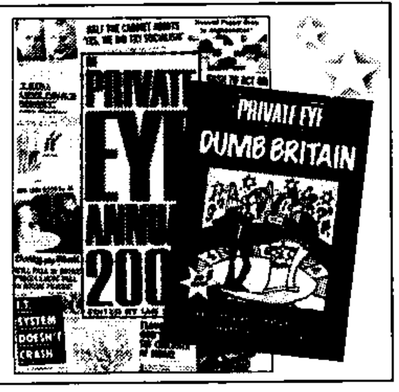

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ABC

FAILING to deal with hidden political loans, fake donors and the like means the Electoral Commission is set to lose one of its key tasks: encouraging more people to vote.

When the commission was set up in 2000, the commissioners thought that keeping track of political donations would be dull but not difficult, and that there would be plenty of time (and a £7m budget) to focus on reversing the decline in voter turnout, one of its core responsibilities.

Alas, long before "Donorgate", the Committee on Standards in Public Life had already found the commission guilty of regulatory failure and recommended that it drop the guff about encouraging more people to vote and instead set up a new "compliance unit" with powers to fine political parties.

Justice Secretary Jack Straw responded to the recommendations on 20 November, saying the government would support the commission's withdrawal from encouraging "participation in the democratic process". But whether it gets its tough new compliance unit remains to be seen.

● *Cash for Labour: HP Sauce special, 8*

EVEN as Chancellor Alistair Darling stood up in the Commons and blamed a junior member of staff at Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs in Newcastle for the loss of child benefit records affecting 25 million people, privately the government was admitting that there were far deeper problems.

A briefing for HMRC staff on the same day as Darling's statement confirmed, in a section headed "How were HMRC processes breached?", that "the management responsibilities for controlling and notifying transmission, despatch and receipt of data were inadequate".

Despite this, the following day Prime Minister Gordon Brown refused to admit to "systemic failures", falling back instead on a recent endorsement from the National Audit Office to defend the chaos that has followed HMRC's creation nearly three years ago.

● *Child Benefits scandal in full, 27*

MINISTERS insist the recent loss of sensitive personal data hasn't derailed plans for identity cards – but even the prime minister's hand-picked advisers are losing enthusiasm.

When the "public private forum on identity" was set up by Gordon Brown last year to "consider how public and private sectors can work together, harnessing the best identity technology to maximise efficiency and effectiveness", it was supposed to report by "Easter 2007".

Six months on not a peep has emerged and the forum's secretary won't answer calls. The best Treasury Minister Andy Burnham could tell parliament last month was: "No date has been fixed for publication, which may be later this year or next year."

Rumour is that the forum's private sector members (who include Barclays, Boots, British Airways and O2) can see nothing but an expensive headache for their shareholders. Optimism has dissipated since early noises from chairman Sir James Crosby about a "partnership between the public and private sectors in implementing better and possibly complementary processes for identity management". Like the "complementary processes" between HMRC and the courier company TNT, perhaps?

● *Man in the Eye-T: Sir David Varney, 10*

Cash for jokes

■ **Worse than Darling? It's Andy Burnham!** 9
■ **Planes, trains and a lack of vision** 12
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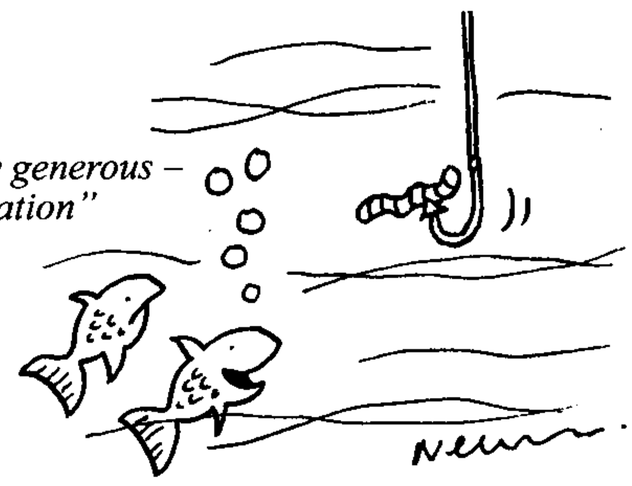


"How generous – a donation"

MEANWHILE that other great advert for the central collection of personal data – the NHS's National Programme for IT – continues its slow collapse.

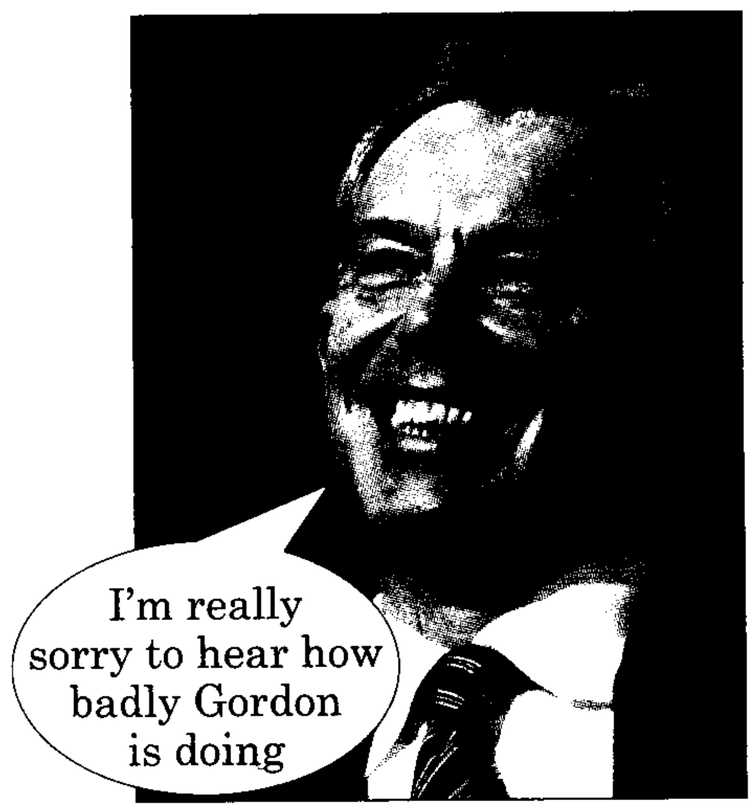
The core contracts covering the central database and the regional monopolies are now being "reset", having failed to deliver the coordinated national health IT system promised five years ago. The body running the project, Connecting for Health, refuses to divulge details of the changes, though insiders say the project could only be reined in with significant compensation to the suppliers despite their terrible records.

The core suppliers who have failed to deliver are Accenture, CSC, Fujitsu and BT. Funnily enough, when the shortlist of suppliers for ID cards was announced a few weeks ago it included… Accenture, CSC and Fujitsu. Oh, and EDS, which managed to be so pisspoor on the NHS IT programme it was booted off – which takes some doing.

THE BBC has found that 40 percent of the £5bn Labour promised to "improve" squaddies' miserable housing would actually go on rents to Annington Homes, the firm that bought the houses in a deal with Tory Defence Minister Michael Portillo in 1996.

But who or what is Annington?

The company is run by a finance house called Terra Firma Capital. As *Private Eye* revealed in its last issue, Lord Owen, who runs the UK National Defence Association which lobbies for more defence spending, is an adviser to Terra Firma. Other big names working for Terra Firma – and hence profiting from army rents – include Tony Blair's old adviser Lord Birt and the shadow foreign secretary, William Hague.



Street Of Shame

THE congregation at last week's memorial service for Bill Deedes at the Guards Chapel was an incongruous mixture of old and new *Telegraph*, revealing how many of his newspaper's traditions have been jettisoned in recent years.

Where, for example, were the *Telegraph*'s proprietors? Surely Sir David and Sir Frederick Barclay would turn up to pay tribute to their longest-serving employee? Er, no.

But the junior Barclays, Aidan and Howard, were there – along with Murdoch MacLennan, the former Associated Newspapers boxwallah they hired as chief executive to turn the *Telegraph* into the *Mail*. Alas, the trio had to endure muttered but audible insults from the row behind: the organisers had seated them in front of Deedes's biographer Stephen Robinson, whom MacLennan brutally sacked a few months ago just after Robinson's return from compassionate leave for a bereavement.

Meanwhile new *Sunday Telegraph* editor Ian MacGregor (another cuckoo-in-the-nest from the *Mail*) was seated next to an old gent named J.W.M. Thompson – and hadn't the faintest idea who he was, even though Thompson edited the *Sunday Telegraph* for 10 years, from 1976 to 1986. Does MacGregor know anything about the history of the newspaper he now runs? Apparently not.

Still, if it's any consolation to the new editor, Thompson hadn't a clue who MacGregor was either.

"DARKNESS is falling in Vladimir Putin's Russia," declared the *Daily Telegraph* on 5 November. "Its ruler's grip on politics, the media and economy has sinister implications for democracy," wrote executive foreign editor Con Coughlin from Moscow.

"As a former KGB officer under the Soviet system, Putin understands the value of propaganda in indoctrinating the populace, and the stranglehold he has over the media is equal to the control he exercises over the economy."

Thankfully some brave media organizations still scrutinize events behind the Iron Curtain – such as the *Daily Telegraph*, which on 29 November ran the fourth of a series of eight-page pull-outs entitled "Russia: Beyond the Headlines". "We hope it will help you, dear reader, to better understand 'those enigmatic Russians' and the changes underway in Russia," stated its main editorial page, beside lengthy opinion columns on the need to block Kosovan independence and suspend the CFE [Conventional Forces in Europe] arms treaty.

A smaller message at the bottom of the page read: "This special advertising supplement to the *Daily Telegraph* was prepared by *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* in co-operation with the advertising department and did not involve the *Daily Telegraph* news staff."

And what is *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* exactly? A daily paper published by the same Russian government that is so adept at indoctrinating the populace!

"ENGLISH schoolchildren have plummeted in an international league table for reading skills," sighed the *Daily Telegraph* on 29 November.

"Primary school pupils slipped from third in 2001 to 19th last year in the authoritative study of 45 countries and provinces. Only the results of Morocco and Romania fell more sharply."

The writing skills of *Telegraph* hacks don't seem too hot, either. The accompanying league table was headed: "Distribution of reading acheivement 2006."

THE *Daily Telegraph* gave plenty of coverage to Andrew Marr's recent evidence to a House of Lords committee, though his only mildly newsworthy comment was a suggestion that Sky News's accuracy might occasionally suffer because of its urge to break stories first.

At the same session, their lordships heard the far more interesting testimony of ex-*Sunday Telegraph* editor Dominic Lawson, who revealed that *Telegraph* chairman Aidan Barclay asked him to pull a story about David Blunkett. "It is not healthy when the intuitive reaction of the owner is to side with a politician against the ditor," Lawson told the committee. "I had a pretty direct line to Conrad Black. In the case of the Barclays I had a man called Murdoch MacLennan who acts as a kind of barrier... You can see it in the astonishing turnover of editors. It suggests a degree of interference that was not previously the case." Whereas Marr's evidence made for a 550-word page-lead, the *Telegraph* decided that Lawson's didn't even merit a news-in-brief.

Which has a curious consequence. Editor-in-chief Will Lewis was keen to rebut Lawson's comments – but could hardly do so in his own paper as it had suppressed the original story. So he was forced to reply via a *Grauniad* interview this week, in which he dismissed Lawson as a technophobic twit. "It must all be a bit confusing for him, mustn't it, given a lot of what journalism is now involves computers and electronic stuff. Can he use email now…?"

How this answers Lawson's points about Barclay and MacLennan is something of a mystery. But then much about Lewis is incomprehensible: he may be a computer whiz, but he has only a passing acquaintance with either newspapers or the English language. Here is how the *Grauniad* summarised his plans for the *Torygraph*: "The next phase after home pages and social networking will be the 'show period' – pushing out content in thin silos, verticals and channels, to self-publishing sites and places such as US gossip website glam.com, which has 23 million global unique users." As Lewis told the paper: "This is what we are basing our future on."

If Sir Herbert Gussett visits glam.com to see what this future entails, he'll find "Celebrities in bikinis", "Exclusive *Lovebites* trailers" and "Carrie Bradshaw's killer heels". Can beauty tips from Simon Heffer be far behind?

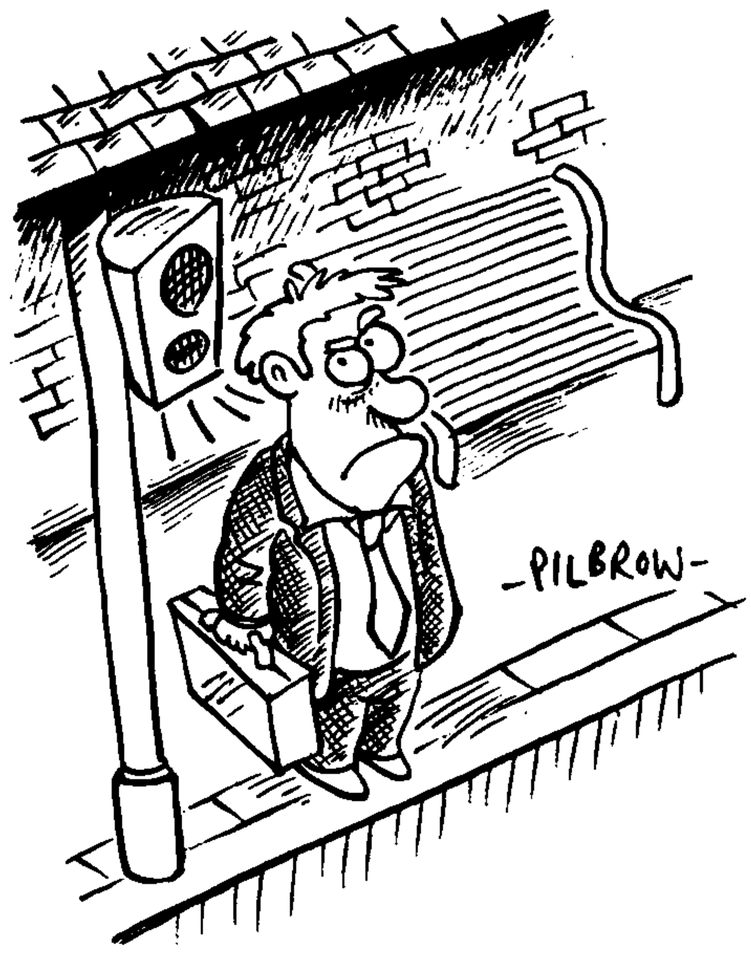
HOW to make the Labour donations story even more murky than it initially appears?

The *Daily Telegraph* found the answer with its front page of 29 November, with its front-page headline "Hunt for the 'real donor'" over a large picture of David Abrahams "shaking hands with the former Israeli ambassador Zvi Heifetz at a London party last year", pointing out for good measure that "Zvi Heifetz was questioned then cleared over money-laundering allegations."

Heifetz, who claims this was the only occasion on which he has ever met Mr Abrahams, at an event to celebrate Israeli Independence Day, swiftly denied any connection to the donations to the BBC's Nick Robinson – who mused that "I trust the *Telegraph* have good lawyers".

"Those close to Mr Heifetz have expressed anger at the notion that there might be any stronger link, saying it was reminiscent of other cases in history where Jews have been accused of involvement in a conspiracy," Robinson noted – and, as if on cue, Mad Mel Phillips waded in on her own *Spectator* blog, claiming that this was "Britain's Goebbels Moment".

Undeterred by any of this – or by the lack of any evidence to suggest that the cash originated anywhere other than County Durham and its environs – the *Sunday Telegraph* returned to the fray a few days later. "Mr Abrahams, a practising Jew, has strong links with Israel," noted Chris Hastings and Andrew Alderson. "For many years, he has made regular trips to Israel with Trade Union Friends of Israel and earlier this year, in Britain, he met Ehud Olmert, the Israeli prime minister, whom he has also seen in Israel. His neighbours in Newcastle recall years ago that their road had to be closed for 'security reasons' when the Israeli ambassador visited Mr Abrahams



"The 11.15 is delayed due to free newspapers on the line"

at his home. Mr Abrahams, however, insists that his charity and political donations are from his own pocket – and that he is not the conduit of another mystery benefactor."

RED faces at Wapping, where the *Sun* recently recruited footballer John Terry to News International's "Help for Heroes" charity in support of wounded British soldiers.

No sooner had the *Sun* praised Terry for persuading the England squad to donate their match fees from the Croatia game than the *Screws* splashed him over its front page, accusing England's skipper of being "so drunk he urinated on the floor" of a West End lap-dancing club in the match build-up. The *Screws* went on to claim that the footballer "made a fool of himself with the club's lapdancers". Its anonymous witness asked: "What sort of behaviour is that for an England captain?"

Only after publication did the *Screws* remember that Terry had agreed to do an exclusive *Screws* photo session with injured soldiers days later. Would he pull out? A quick reverse-ferret saved the day. Last Sunday, a mere week after lambasting him as a shameful degenerate, the *Screws* had an adulatory two-page spread about the big-hearted England skipper visiting war-wounded troops at Headley Court rehab centre. "It's great to see John Terry here," said one. "He's a brilliant bloke."

Still, the *Screws* nimbly avoided another potential embarrassment. Terry had been out on the razz with various Chelsea and England team members, including Frank Lampard. Curiously, the *Screws'* source was particularly keen to exonerate Lampard of any impropriety: "Lampard was there but he wasn't drunk or anything."

FACT: Frank Lampard writes a column for the *News of the World*.

FOOTBALL manager Harry Redknapp was incandescent with rage after a dawn raid from police investigating corruption claims last week.

"I was particularly disappointed that the police should come knocking on my door with photographers from a well-known newspaper," he railed.

The well-known newspaper was in fact the *Sun*.

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Costright, Turks & Caicos Islands

"MURAT BACK IN FRAME" shrieked the front page of the Sun on 3 December, over the news that the original suspect in the disappearance of Madeleine McCann was the subject of a new investigation.

"A nanny at the holiday complex… claims she saw suspect Robert Murat there on the fateful night, it emerged yesterday."

Could this nanny – "Charlotte Pennington, 20" – be related to the Charlotte Pennington, 20, who "spoke publicly for the first time" to the *Sun* on 25 September to tell them that "Robert Murat - the first suspect in the case – was in the area at the time, despite his claims he was at home"?

Indeed she could. So why is the *Sun* – along with several other papers – splashing on her testimony as if it were something new? Because she has now given her account to private detectives working for the McCanns, allowing the papers to reheat her tale for a third time.

We have, of course, been here before – after the dismissal of the initial investigating officer Goncalo Amaral at the beginning of October, and the subsequent decision by his replacement Paulo Rebelo to order a "root and branch" review of the case. Naturally, this involved re-interviewing Murat and those witnesses who had implicated him – news which the *Sun* greeted on 31 October with the headline "MURAT 'GRILLED AGAIN'".

Expect the entire McCann news cycle – Tapas Nine, Belgian sightings, Moroccan connections et al – to come around once again over the next few months, with the next "Murat did it after all" revelations due sometime in early February.

ON HIS first day in charge of the Bizarre column, the new "prime minister of showbiz" Gordon Smart detailed his "manifesto" (geddit?) to *Sun* readers.

"Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan and Johnny Foreigner of equally limited talent are welcome on Bizarre on condition that they are little wrigglers and appear almost naked," he announced. "The caners league continues. All celebrities, nonebrities and musicians are actively encouraged to get tanked up and cause high jinks." To prove the point, he led off with a picture of Girls Aloud singer Cheryl Cole embarking on some "liver punishment" in a nightclub, pointing out that "you can't deny she has cracking bangers".

In this spirit – and to prove the *Sun's* point in its 12 November editorial that "Britain is in danger of becoming a binge-drinking paradise" – we present this picture of Gordon Smart showing off a pair of cracking bangers of his own. His little wriggler is not pictured.

IN HER final Bizarre column in the *Sun*, Victoria Newton boasts that she's a great pal of Coldplay – and that the band have given her a framed picture to mark her departure.

Alas, the airheaded hackette doesn't say whether she returned the favour by presenting them with a framed copy of her scoop from February 2006, "Coldplay 'Split'" – which she then adjusted slightly the next day under the headline "Coldplay 'No Split'."

LAST WEEK's headline-grabbing *NME* interview with Morrissey – in which the Mancunian-born singer, a resident of Ireland, America and Italy for the past two decades, blamed "the immigration explosion" for the fact that "England is a memory now" – appeared under an inventive new byline.

After interviewer Tim Jonze complained that: "For reasons I'll probably never understand, *NME* have rewritten the Moz piece… virtually none of it is my words or beliefs so I've asked for my name to be taken off it," the article was headed thus: "*Interview:* Tim Jonze. *Words:* NME".

JUST FANCY THAT 1

"Drama in the Antarctic as Cruise Ship is Holed."

– Front-page headline in the Times, 24 November, next to a photo of the stricken ship lying on her side having hit an iceberg.

"Cruise Special: Break The Arctic Ice."

– Front-page headline on the Times Travel section, 24 November, accompanied by a photo of two happy passengers on board a cruise ship in deckchairs looking out to sea at huge icebergs.

AFTER the *Daily Star* carried a "story" on 7 November that Paris Hilton wanted to stop elephants getting drunk on vats of fermenting rice beer in India, the tale was all round the world before the truth could get its boots on.

The London Paper immediately copied out the scoop, as did the World Entertainment News Network agency; and it soon found its way to *Now* magazine and the *Sun*, along with papers in the US and Canada.

On 13 November an Associated Press stringer in Assam then got quotes from animal welfare groups hailing Hilton's "global campaign", and by the afternoon her attempts to "save binge-drinking elephants" were on no fewer than 289 online news sites.

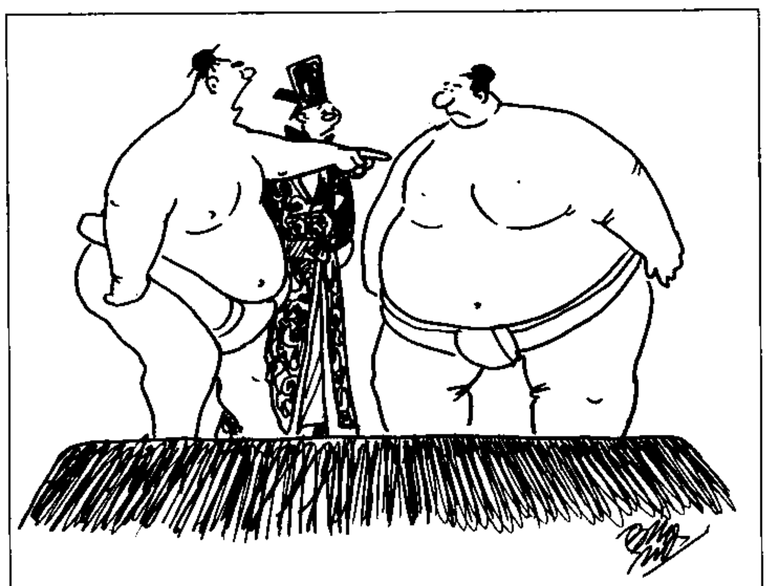
Alas, this was also the day Hilton's publicist Lori Berk confirmed that her client had "never made any comments about helping drunken elephants in India". Papers and TV stations across the US duly retracted the story – but the *Daily Star*? The next day it was still embellishing its "scoop" with quotes from welfare campaigners' comments. It wasn't until two weeks later that Hilton herself was asked about the story on US TV. "Why would I care if an elephant got drunk? Can an elephant get drunk? I've never talked about that in my life."

HARVEY PRICE is a five-year-old autistic boy who also suffers from septo-optic dysplasia, a neurological disorder which causes blindness, brain abnormalities and hormonal problems – including, in his case, a growth hormone deficiency which means that he weighs more than seven stone. Nevertheless celebrity magazine *Heat* gave away a sticker of him last week – alongside a pull-out of 49 others – accompanied by the hilarious caption: "Harvey wants to eat me!"

In the wake of what the magazine described as complaints from "a number of readers", as well as disability charities and Price's mother, who happens to be the glamour model and TV presenter Jordan, editor Mark Frith issued an "unreserved apology".

"It was never our intention to cause offence to Harvey's family and friends nor to you, our readers," he claimed. "In particular, it was never our aim to make fun of Harvey's disabilities."

Oh yeah? Perhaps Frith should avail himself of the adjacent sticker in the magazine's pull-out, and attach it to his desk as a reminder: "DON'T LIE!"



"Hey, Ref! He's wearing a suit!"

"The vicar's been watching reality TV again".

PHRASE & FEEBLE

JUST as the suffix "-gate" adds a Watergate thrill to any old scandal, so now "-denier" – an echo from "Holocaust-denier" – has become the suffix of choice for public figures who want to scare their critics into silence. Thus hacks who question *Telegraph* editor Will Lewis's techno-utopianism are dubbed "digital deniers", as if they're barely distinguishable from David Irving.

Now even clod-hopping Home Secretary Jacqui Smith has learned the trick. Having promised "full consultation" before deciding whether to extend the 28-day detention period, she was recently obliged to meet her Tory shadow David Davis to discuss it. Smith's idea of consultation became apparent as soon as Davis entered the room. "So," she said accusingly, "you're still a 28-day denier, are you?"

IN A *cri de coeur* about the national housing shortage, *Guardian* pundit George Monbiot argues that much more could be done "to stamp out what is Britain's ugliest inequality: second homes".

Brave words. Is he by any chance referring to his editor Alan Rusbridger, who has a handsome residence in north London and a country retreat in Gloucestershire?

"MEDIA executives' pay outstrips performance," boomed a piece in last week's *Financial Times*, reporting the results of a survey that showed media bosses earn well above the average of FTSE chief executives.

"Among examples of media sector chief executives whose basic salaries exceed or have exceeded the average for their index are Charles Allen, former head of ITV, at £1.07m (compared with a FTSE 100 average of £725,000) and Sly Bailey of Trinity Mirror (£700,000 against a FTSE 350 average of £350,000)."

Strangely, the *FT* neglected to mention the lavish rewards of another notable FTSE 100 media boss: Dame Marjorie Scardino, chief executive of *FT* publisher Pearson. According to the company's most recent annual report, Dame Marje collected a salary of £830,000 (well above the FTSE 100 average) and an additional "performance incentive" of £1.067m (more than 120% of her salary, well above the FTSE media average of 78.5 per cent). Which rather proves the point of the *FT* survey, if only the Pink 'Un had had the courage to print it!

JUST FANCY THAT 2

"Access at home to a computer [is] strongly associated with higher achievement."

– Page 50 of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, *published last week*

"Nine to ten-year-olds were considerably more likely to use computers for playing games than for reading on the internet and... spending three or more hours doing either was associated with lower reading attainment."

– Page 54 of the, er, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, *published last week*

CASH FOR LABOUR

CONFUSION still reigns at Labour party HQ over how large donations are supposed to be handled.

Although they should have been vetted by the national executive committee's "business board", chaired by party treasurer Jack Dromey, NEC chairwoman Dianne Hayter last week unequivocally told Radio 4's *Today* programme that this no longer happens.

"It is not extant," she admitted. "So the committee no longer exists?" followed up interviewer Jim Naughtie. "That's right," confirmed Hayter, explaining that the job was now done separately by officials.

At his press conference the next day, however, Brown insisted the board considers donations in detail. When an unidentified hack who had obviously heard Hayter queried this, Brown retorted: "No that's not correct, if I may say so. The business board *does* meet."

Calls to Labour's press office haven't shed much light. Though a spokesman insists Brown was right – meaning Labour's NEC chairwoman must have been 180° degrees wrong – at the time of going to press he still hadn't been able to say when the board last met.

CARRY ON DONATING

WHEN Labour party donor David Abrahams tried to conceal his identity by giving more than £660,000 to the party under other people's names, it caused outrage as it was unlawful. But another group of "intermediaries" are allowed to go on donating to Labour without breaking the law.

Professional lobbyists donated more than £45,000 to the party in the most recent quarter. Such cash gifts are part of what one donor, **APCO**, calls "direct advocacy, relationship building" with "elected leaders and government officials".

APCO raises the cash from its clients and then pays the money to Labour to help build relationships. However, because such lobbying companies do other advocacy work in addition to funding the party, the Electoral Commission does not ask them to register which if any of their clients is linked to the payments. APCO gave Labour £5,500 in the latest quarter.

The latest register includes £5,875 from **DLA Piper Rudnik**, the lobbying wing of an international law firm. The money was used to sponsor the "invitation only Heads of Mission Lunch" for foreign dignitaries hosted by Foreign Secretary David Miliband at the Labour party conference.

Labour's "sales brochure" for sponsors described the event as "one of the main events at conference. It is traditionally attended by all international visitors and past speakers and guests have included the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, Secretary of State for International Development and Party Chair. This event is very informal and offers sponsors an ideal opportunity for networking and meeting new people."

Tim Clement-Jones, the Liberal Democrat peer who runs the DLA's lobbying, told *Private Eye* he did not take clients to the lunch, which was "more of a buffet really".

In the same quarter **EUK Consulting** gave £7,000 to the party. It has donated more than £63,000 since 2003. EUK would not respond to inquiries about the relationship between the payments and its clients, which include British American Tobacco and potato chipmaker McCain.

Four Communications, a lobbying company run by Jeremy Fraser, the former Labour leader of Southwark council, gave Labour £5,800. Its spokesman told *Private Eye* it bought tickets for Labour's gala dinner and took a number of unidentified clients and contacts. Four represents many property companies, as well as some multinationals including **Shell** and PFI specialist **Bouygues**.

City lobbying firm **Finsbury** gave Labour £9,475, according to the latest register. It did not respond to inquiries. Its clients include **Northern Rock**.

Sovereign Strategy was the most generous lobbying donor. The north-east company gave £10,000, and has donated more than £122,000 since 2002. Sovereign, which is led by former Labour MEP Alan Donnelly, maintains its donations do not relate to any particular clients, who until recently included US nuclear firm **Fluor**.

While the sums involved are smaller than Abrahams' secret payments, the lobbyists inhabit an interlinked world. Gordon Brown's fundraiser Jon Mendelsohn, who knew about the secret donations, was a former lobbyist himself; while Abrahams attended the same gala dinners and think tank events as the lobbying companies who are trying to buy influence with the party.

CASH FOR TORIES

BEFORE the Tories get too excited by the latest party-funding scandal they should pause to consider their own nifty footwork in bypassing the strict new rules on donations.

The *Guardian* noted recently that David Cameron and his shadow ministers have often enjoyed the use of a luxury Falcon 900 private jet on trips abroad. The plane is lent free of charge by Flying Lion Ltd, a company owned by Lord Ashcroft which is registered in Hamilton, Bermuda.

The Electoral Commission's website, which logs all these donations-in-kind, also summarises the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA). "Donations from overseas sources are effectively prohibited under PPERA," it explains, "since only those individuals on a UK electoral roll and companies that are UK registered and carry on business in the UK can fund parties."

So the free trips donated by a Bermuda-registered firm, worth at least £500,000 in recent years, must surely be illegal? Er, no. For the Tories have cunningly exploited a loophole in the act which allows members or officers of a political party to have the cost of overseas visits met by "an individual or organisation which is not a permissible donor as defined by PPERA". The purpose of this exception was to allow politicians to accept expenses-paid invitations from, for instance, a foreign university or chamber of commerce without being hauled off by Knacker of the Yard. But it is so loosely drafted that it exempts much else besides.

This has the most bizarre ramifications. If, say, David Cameron were to fly to Edinburgh aboard a plane provided by Ashcroft's Bermuda-registered company, he'd be breaking the law. But if he used the same free plane to fly to Paris or Moscow, it would be entirely legal. Can this really be the case? The Electoral Commission confirmed to the *Eye* last week that it is indeed.

MAN IN THE EYE

JON MENDELSOHN

FROM the moment Gordon Brown appointed Jon Mendelsohn as Labour's chief fundraiser it was a safe bet that embarrassment couldn't be far behind. It's now almost a decade since the *Eye* first drew attention to his remarkable talent for landing head-first in the soup.

Having worked as a fundraiser for Blair, after the 1997 election Mendelsohn got together with two other Labour apparatchiks to form the lobbying outfit Lawson Lucas Mendelsohn (LLM). "We will not just work for anyone because it 'pays'," their brochure promised. "We believe that there will be a new breed of 'ethical winners' who will demonstrate that businesses no longer operate in a moral vacuum… LLM is as careful about its reputation as it is about its clients."

Some Labour MPs were therefore surprised, only a few weeks later, to receive phone calls from Mendelsohn and his sidekick Craig Leviton on behalf of the Canadian firm Quebecor, in connection with its takeover bid for the British printing company Watmoughs plc.

Quebecor was notorious in Jewish circles for the anti-Semitism of its founder, Pierre Peladeau, who used to keep a bust of Mussolini in his office. In 1990 he ordered fashion writers at the *Journal de Montreal* not to write about Jewish designers, explaining that: "I have a lot of respect for the Jews but they take up too much space."

Mendelsohn of all people might have been expected to know this, as a former director of the Inter-Parliamentary Council Against Anti-Semitism and vice-chairman of the Holocaust Educational Trust. But he confessed to the *Eye* that he had done only "cursory searches" before taking the Quebecor shilling.

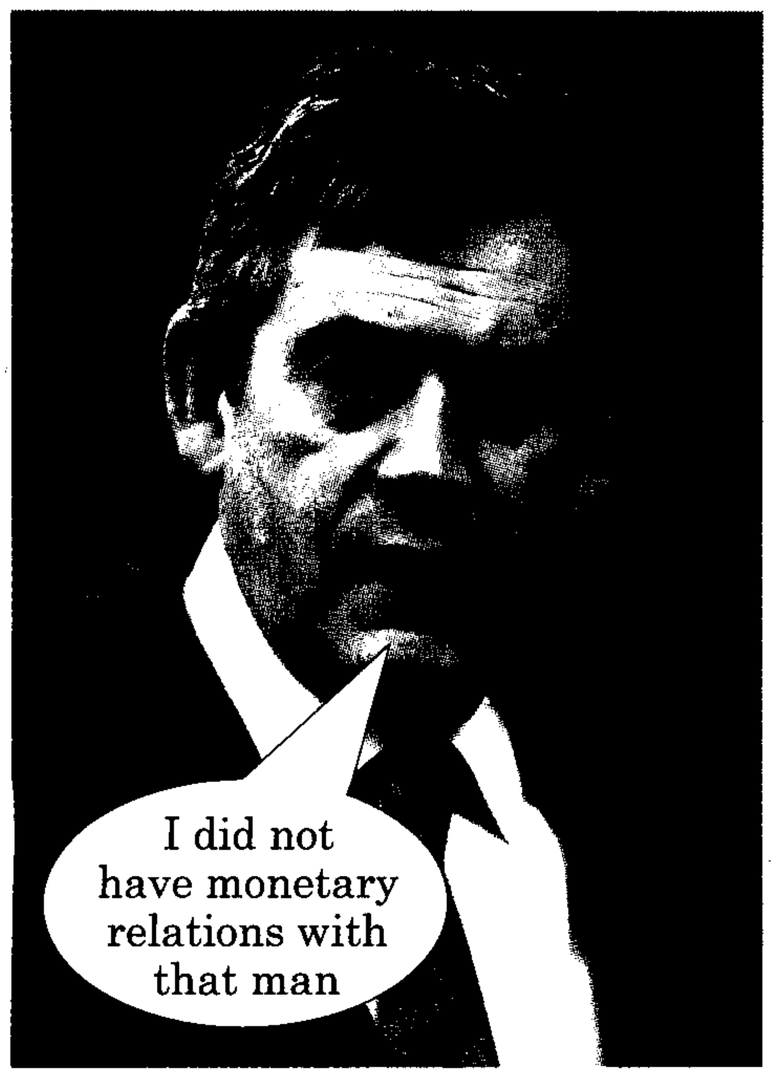
LLM soon had other controversial clients – including Rupert Murdoch, who hired the firm to help him undermine the new government's "Fairness at Work" proposals. So how sincere was its boast of not just working for anyone? In 1998, Mendelsohn was approached by an undercover *Observer* hack posing as a potential client representing American energy companies who wanted to find a way round environmental laws. Instead of recoiling from this "morally indefensible" proposition, Mendelsohn advised the companies to recast their plan for new, polluting power stations into something that sounded "Earth-friendly". As he explained: "Tony is very anxious to be seen as green. Everything has to be couched in environmental language – even if it's slightly Orwellian." Once the US company changed its jargon, and perhaps made a donation to the Millennium Dome, there should be no problem in polluting away like billy-o. As Mendelsohn said: "This government likes to do deals."

One of his own bizarre deals was done with a former colleague and friend, Derek "Jerry" Lewis, in 1998. Some years earlier, according to Mendelsohn's lawyers, he had done what he thought was a "favour" by letting himself into Lewis's flat to clear up "a large amount of rubbish" while his friend was away on holiday. When Lewis returned from holiday he was very angry about what he saw as a break-in, and threatened to prosecute. Rather than risk legal action, Mendelsohn paid him off with a cheque for £10,000.

NUMBER CRUNCHING

£950 Donation illegally received by Scottish Labour leader Wendy Alexander from businessman based in Jersey who cannot vote in UK

£37,000,000 Donations legally received by Conservative party from Michael Ashcroft, a businessman based in Belize who can vote in UK



SALMOND STAKES

THE Scottish National Party was keen to exploit Labour's latest difficulties over donations, seeking to associate money from David Abrahams with Labour's 2007 Scottish parliamentary election campaign.

It was, after all, an SNP member of parliament who triggered the "cash for honours" police investigation which so embarrassed the Blair government. So this is a party that wouldn't allow wealthy people to buy influence… or would it?

For years the SNP railed against Margaret Thatcher's deregulation of buses, which involves taxpayers subsidising bus companies that, in return, can run buses wherever they like to maximise profits, and with no competing bus companies in most areas to stop them charging whatever they like. Some people have made fortunes from deregulation, chiefly Stagecoach founders Brian Souter and his sister Ann Gloag – jointly estimated by the *Sunday Times* to be worth £770m.

With so much at stake, Souter is a vigorous campaigner against reversal of deregulation. After the Commons transport committee called for it last year, Souter took a giant dinosaur model and cardboard cut-out of committee chair Gwyneth Dunwoody to a conference to mock the idea of public accountability.

As the SNP rolled towards governing Scotland, it reaffirmed its commitment to reversing bus deregulation with a 2006 conference resolution stating that it "recognises the failures of bus deregulation across Scotland and reiterates its support for re-regulation of Scotland's buses".

Then Souter, a pillar of the Church of the Nazarene in Perth, donated £500,000 to the SNP and was personally welcomed by Alex Salmond as "one of the outstanding entrepreneurs of his generation... I am grateful for his encouragement and support".

And lo, it came to pass that the SNP erased regulation of buses from its manifesto!

CALLED TO ORDURE

WHAT with Northern Rock and the child benefit data loss, so much ordure has been dumped on the Chancellor, Alistair Darling, that his deputy Andy Burnham has gone ignored. This is just as well. If you thought Darling was bad, wait till you hear about Treasury Chief Secretary Burnham. He's even more clueless!

Young Burnham, 37, has an inoffensive manner. He is a football fan, which by today's feeble values is held as a sign of great merit. And he has in the past been comparatively polite to opposition MPs. Plenty of women and gay men find him pretty. But, er, is he any good at defending our finances?

Two recent Commons discussions – on our European Union payments and on public sector pensions – show that Burnham is slippery when it comes to big billions. He happily hides behind Whitehall secrecy rather than telling parliament how much public money is being spent.

During Treasury questions Burnham was asked about public sector pensions by East Devon Tory Hugo Swire, the onetime Etonian shadow cabinet member who, with Bertie Woosterish genius, managed to fall out with David Cameron when the Tories were in their darkest days four months ago. Swire, who is now having to rebuild his career, asked Burnham to cough up the size of the country's liability on public pensions.

This must be one of the most important statistics in Whitehall but Burnham would not come clean, merely producing a mouldy March 2005 figure of £630bn.

Swire asked why public sector pensions liability was calculated on a different scale to private sector. Burnham: "The Hon Gentleman will know that those are complex calculations." In other words: search me, guv!

Burnham promised to "come back soon" with an up-to-date assessment of long-term liability, once those Einsteins at the Office for National Statistics had done some sums. Tory frontbencher Justine Greening noted that a firm of actuaries called Watson Wyatt reckon the pensions liability could be as high as £960bn. Burnham, who has the dark, handsome looks of a Thunderbirds puppet, was at this point saved by a heckle from oafish Bolsover MP Dennis Skinner. By the time the House had recovered itself Greening's alarming figure of £960bn had been forgotten.

Like many of Gordon Brown's ministers, Burnham is currently happier asking the Tories what they would do rather than saying what he is doing – now – while he's in power. He attacked the Tories for telling the *Sunday Mirror* that "every family in Britain will pay £33,000 to fund the pension promises made to public sector workers".

This was "an alarming and misleading statement to make to the families of this country," thundered Burnham. So what is the figure, then, chief secretary? He did not say. He merely suggested that the *Sunday Mirror* quotation showed the Tories intended never to honour public sector pensions. Even by the standards of political misrepresentation, this was going some.

A moderate Tory, Philip Dunne (Ludlow), again pressed Burnham to produce an up-to-date figure for pensions liability. Burnham: "As I explained, it is a complex calculation and we will therefore take our time to get it right. It is a complex figure which should not be grossly simplified and misrepresented." Complex? Or inconvenient?

Equally inconvenient is the figure which says how many billions we pour into the EU every year. Tories say this sum is about to rise by £2.3bn a year. Peanuts after Northern Rock! Burnham claimed that Britain and France now have "rough parity on net contributions to the European Union".

Tory frontbencher Philip Hammond invited him to publish official Treasury estimates of the net contributions of all member states. Burnham: "It is not common practice for one EU state to publish details about others in a haphazard and cherry-picking way."

When Burnham started to claim that the British rebate (won by Mrs Thatcher) was about to rise, Labour Eurosceptic Ian Davidson made a deadly intervention. "The rebate is a percentage of the difference between what we pay in and what we receive back," he told Bunrham. "If the rebate is rising, the gap between what we pay in and what we receive is also rising. Rather than being enthusiastic about the rebate rising, we should look for it to fall."

Burnham, blinking hard and looking queasy: "My Hon Friend is correct that that is how the rebate is calculated."

'Gavel Basher'

SHOCK, horror – yet more TV dodginess! The culprits this time are Her Majesty's Conservative Party.

In one of the pisspoor "broadcasts" posted on the Tories' website, a distinctly uncomfortable-looking George Osborne strolls around Warrington promising to take nine out of ten first-time buyers out of stamp duty. By happy chance he stumbles across a couple who are struggling to get on the housing market. The young lady explains that she and her partner "are just starting out on our careers and all we want is a bit of fairness and opportunity".

Odd that the young lady being quoted is listed in the surrounding publicity as "an events coordinator", because to many people she is most instantly recognisable as Haili McHugh, a former *News of the Screws* trainee who "defected" to the *People* last year. It is reassuring that whatever prompted Andy Coulson (the then *Screws* editor) to help her on the way hasn't damaged their working relationship now he is head of communications for the Conservative Party.

MUCH merriment in the Commons when Tory MP Anthony Steen mentioned that he had witnessed a police raid on a massage parlour (he was there as a guest of the cops).

A heckler loudly shouted: "Joe Ashton!" This was a reference to former Labour MP Ashton who was found in a Northampton massage parlour in 1998.

Hansard usually records such audible heckles. This time, mysteriously, it made no mention of it in its following day's printed report. Why not? Was it because Ashton is a friend of Commons Speaker Michael "Gorbals Mick" Martin and was therefore deemed worthy of special protection?

SHADOW Defence Minister Dr Julian Lewis MP resigned his life membership of the Oxford Union last week in protest at the gig by famous comedy-duo Nick Griffin and David Irving. He denounced those who invited the BNP leader and the jailbird Neo-Nazi as "ambitious young wannabes and would-bes" suffering from "naïve vanity".

Can he by any chance be related to the Dr Julian Lewis who ran the Coalition for Peace Through Security from an office in Whitehall in the early 1980s? That Lewis wasn't quite so squeamish about consorting with the far right, as he proved after receiving a letter from one Dave Jones, who had previously attracted some notoriety as a National Front organiser in the north-west (and was later a BNP candidate). Lewis invited Jones to London, bought him dinner and urged him to pass on any anti-CND titbits that came his way.

In those days Julian Lewis was himself an ambitious young wannabe, rather than the elder statesman he is now. We trust the naïve young things of Oxford will learn from his example.

SLEAZE-BUSTIN' Labour was only too happy to fulfil its pledges back in 1997 and publish a first annual report on quangos full of informative stuff about staff and spending.

What a difference ten years make. When the low-tax campaign group the Taxpayers' Alliance searched for the latest report to help it compile the 2007 Public Sector Rich list, it drew a blank.

Clearly this has nothing to do with the fact that the highest earners in the public sector had pay rises six times the rate of inflation this year, and more than three times the national average. Chin chin!

LIB DEM MP John Hemming has launched a campaign in defence of the good old-fashioned British drunk.

Hemming has tabled an early-day Commons motion condemning government proposals to send undercover police into pubs to slap £80 fixed penalty notices on anyone they find pissed: "This House notes the plan for police officers to visit public houses during the Christmas period in order to identify people who are drunk and raise funds for the Exchequer by charging a fixed penalty fee of £80; questions whether this is a good use of police time; and calls for the Home Office to cancel this plan."

Apart from the cost and the implications for civil liberties, the member for Birmingham Yardley sees another problem: "Defining when someone is drunk is difficult."

Hmmm, not necessarily. Guests at a *Private Eye* lunch at the Coach and Horses, Soho, in June 2005 (*Eye* 1135) had no difficulty whatsoever defining the condition of one of their number who, after downing several bottles of Chateau Norman, loudly regaled the assembly with how he had made his mistress (whom he reckoned to be the 26th in a 23-year marriage) – pregnant. Shtep forward, unsteadily, the hog-whimpering member for Yardley!

FORMER defence minister Lord Gilbert has admitted that defence budgets have in the past been "misallocated" to prop up shipyards in Labour constituencies.

During the recent Lords debate on the armed forces, veteran Labour man Gilbert disclosed that when he was a minister (he did two stints, in the Callaghan and Blair governments), he was "made" to buy Royal Navy frigates from north English company Cammell Laird, even though they each cost £20m more than frigates from other shipyards.

"I was made to buy them for political reasons – for employment policy and regional policy," said Gilbert. He did not say when this was; but even if it was in the 1970s, it's possible the practice has not changed much.

As a former defence minister Gilbert is not able to divulge official secrets, but he hinted hard that the Ministry of Defence had wasted millions making the RAF's Typhoon aircraft ultra agile. From his remarks it is fair to deduce that the Typhoon is able to endure fantastically severe G forces – far more severe, in fact, than can be endured by the human body. But if the G forces kill the pilot long before the plane breaks up, what's the point of such extensive public spending?

MAN IN THE EYE-T

SIR DAVID VARNEY

IN JULY 2005 Sir David Varney, then head of Her Majesty's newly merged Revenue & Customs service, stood before the Commons public accounts committee every inch the Brownite bureaucrat.

The ex-MD of Shell UK and chief executive of British Gas was contemptuous of the old ways of governing Britain, even though the tax credits for working families that he was defending before MPs were an unmitigated disaster.

Sir David moved on before HMRC lost the confidential records of 25m "customers"; but have these debacles dented his faith in the revolutionary power of new technology? Hardly.

As Brown's apostle for "Transformational Government", he's a loud cheerleader for identity cards. Once everyone has a unique identity number backed up by biometric data in the central computer, he has insisted, unimaginable progress can be made. By combining confidential information held by the public and private sectors, police can be alerted instantly when a wanted person uses a cash machine or supermarket loyalty card. Cars can become fingerprint-activated, making driving bans much harder to disobey and road pricing a practical option. NHS records can be bundled together. And so on.

Doubters should examine Sir David's time at Revenue & Customs and note the disturbing similarities between ID cards and working family tax credits. Every critic of the credits has pointed out that failure was built into the system. The poor's tax credits were based on their income in the previous year. Inevitably in many cases their income would have risen by the time the benefits came through, and they would later have to pay back money they had already spent when their circumstances were reassessed. It didn't help that the EDS computer system lost nearly 1m people's records to boot.

Similarly, the dreams of the ID card enthusiasts are built on the belief that it is possible to establish the true identity of everyone in the country through biographical checks and the collection of fingerprints. Informed critics say failure is inevitable on both counts.

A research project organized by the London School of Economics warned that far from protecting citizens the plan to hold everyone's personal data in a single, central repository would be an identity fraudster's dream. "The National Identity Register poses a far larger risk to the safety and security of UK citizens than any of the problems that it purports to solve," the LSE academics concluded.

Ah well, replied the government and its advisers, we will be able to check that criminals haven't hacked into our systems and stolen identities by checking applications against fingerprints.

Whoops! Now the second plank of the government's defence is rotting too. Professor John Daugman, of the University of Cambridge, Computer Laboratory, says that once 6m fingerprints have been collected, only 95 percent of matches will be true and one in a 1,000 will be false. Once the finger-print bank goes above six million to include every adult in the country, he doesn't know what the error rate will be. Nor does anyone else because no government on the planet has attempted a scheme as grandiose as Labour's. All that can be predicted is that criminals will be able to swap identities and innocent people will be treated as suspects.

'Ratbiter'

Down on the Farm

ONE thing you have to hand to the goons at Defra is that their timing is immaculate. Their latest wheeze is to revive the idea of charging livestock farmers £40m a year to help defray the cost of combating animal diseases.

This is on the grounds that because farmers benefit, they should jolly well pay a special tax for the privilege. So let us consider why Defra has chosen this moment to resuscitate the idea of such a levy.

Firstly, the idea arose after the foot-and-mouth epidemic in 2001, which cost taxpayers £3bn and rural communities, including the livestock industry, a great deal more. The greater part of that cost was created by the government's crazy mishandling. All the experts who at once called for ring-vaccination to control the spread of FMD were ignored. Instead, thanks to Professor Roy Anderson and his gang of computer modellers, the Blair government tried to control the disease with an unprecedented killing spree, illegally killing a sixth of all the farm animals in the country, the majority of them healthy.

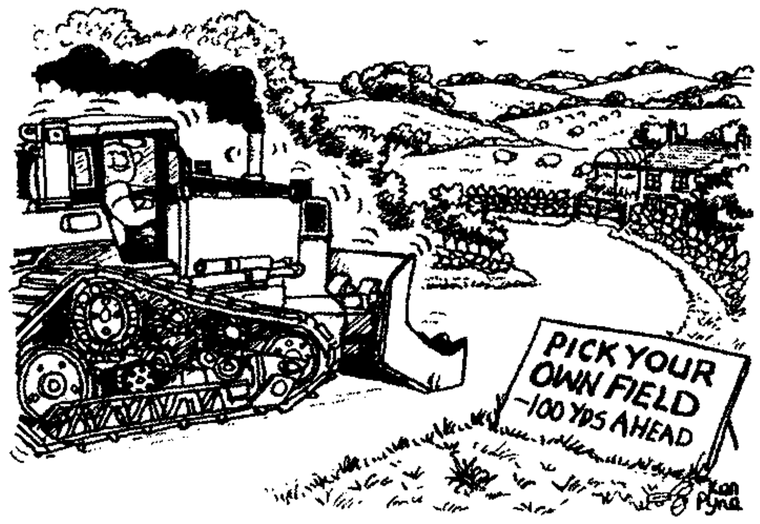
Secondly, the idea has been revived because of the fast-escalating cost of diseases that have recently hit southern Britain. The latest foot-and-mouth outbreaks were entirely the responsibility of Defra itself, for failing to look after its site at Pirbright (the cost so far to the sheep industry alone in lost sales is £520m). Bluetongue, brought in by midges from the continent, is hardly something the farmers could have avoided. But the crazy over-reaction by Defra and the EU, in imposing crippling restrictions on animal movements, is costing farmers hundreds of millions more, and there was absolutely nothing they could have done to persuade Defra or Brussels otherwise. Ditto bird flu.

Thirdly, the reason Defra is suddenly so penny-pinching is that it had its annual budget slashed by Gordon Brown as a punishment for the shambles Margaret Beckett made of the system for handing out EU farm subsidies. Brussels withheld £350m of subsidies and Brown said Defra must make up the shortfall from its agreed budget. The goons, after slashing the money due to be spent on flood defences, vital canal maintenance and various other "unnecessary" items, have now decided to squeeze a further £40m out of farmers themselves – to pay either for blunders created by Defra or for accidents made infinitely more costly by its absurd response.

Finally, it is now announced that Defra is making a further £300m available to enable the goons themselves, those selfsame officials who were responsible for all this havoc, to take early retirement. With their usual exquisite judgement, Defra's officials have decided that the best way to save taxpayers' money is to spend even more of it – on themselves, offering anyone over 50 the chance to retire on £40,000 a year for life.

There is nothing the goons enjoy more than slaughtering large numbers of animals (so long, of course, as they are not foxes or badgers). But perhaps the time has come for the culling to begin nearer home. At least it would save us £300m.

'Muckspreader'



MEDICINE BALLS

Profiting from the poor

WILL Gordon Brown's Third World vaccine programme make mega bucks for the drug industry?

Brown has been instrumental in soliciting $1.5bn worth of donations from the UK, Italy, Canada, Russia and Norway to develop vaccines against pneumococcal pneumonia, the commonest cause of child death in Africa. But research by Donald Light, a professor of bioethics at Princeton, has found that only a quarter of the money will go on covering the costs of the new vaccines. The rest will go towards extra profits for vaccines that are already profitable.

Confused? Welcome to the world of the Advanced Market Commitment (AMC), a heavily promoted but untested public-private partnership for the poor. The AMC is a way of inducing ludicrously rich drug companies to invest in vaccines for neglected (ie unprofitable) diseases of the poor, by promising to match the revenues that companies earn for developing a product for affluent markets. The AMC thus guarantees drug companies large volume sales at a high price, but they only get the money if a good product is developed.

This seems likely given that Wyeth and Glaxo Smithkline are already well down the road of pneumococcal vaccine development. And the estimated Third World price of $5 to $7 a shot is a 90 percent reduction on the western price. But this still makes it the most expensive vaccine in Africa with no guarantee that countries will be able to afford it. And it's more than four times the production cost, according to Suresh Jadhav, an authority on vaccine production costs at the Serum Institute of India.

If the vaccines were sold at cost, 1.2bn children could be inoculated. With a 400 percent mark up, only 300 million get the jab. Thus not only will the AMC fail to deliver the best value for Africa, but it changes the culture of what should be a humanitarian aid programme into the next big market for the drug industry. The vaccines at cost price are already profitable because they are linked to a guaranteed market at western prices. So why allow the drug industry to milk both ends of the cow?

Doubtless this is not what Gordon Brown intended; but if he really wants to save the lives of 5.4m children over the next 25 years, he needs to do the maths and get the price down to a dollar a dose. As with all public-private partnerships, the money will dry up and lasting benefit will only accrue if the countries themselves can manufacture and distribute their own vaccines as cheaply as possible.

M.D.

"We can offer you home visits from angels, shepherds and Magi, but these days a midwife is expecting too much"

HOW about this for ingratitude? Over the past 40 years the Friends of St George's Hospital in Tooting have raised millions of pounds for medical equipment, not to mention running a handy shop selling cheap secondhand books, cards and gifts for patients and visitors. Last year's fundraising helped pay for ECG machines and children's play equipment.

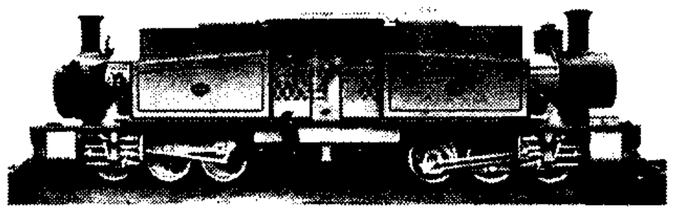
Now hospital bosses want to boot out the shop, which is also the volunteers' HQ, to make way for what was described to the *Surrey Comet* as a "revamped and much-improved entrance". The fancy foyer is costing £2.5m from the hospital's own charitable fund, the St George's Hospital Charity.

The hospital trust wrote to the friends in October telling them there was "a great deal of demand" for space on the hospital site and that the shop in the Grosvenor Wing "will have to close as the space it currently occupies will be needed for clinical or office space". St George's has since announced that the space will be used for a Patient Advice and Liaison Service.

There are also two commercial shops (a flower shop and newsagent's) that rent space in the current hospital entrance. The *Eye* asked the hospital whether they were also being asked to move out for good, but answer came there none.

So much for friendship.

SIGNAL FAILURES



The Heathrow gravy train

GORDON BROWN is backing Heathrow's third runway, ignoring objections from local MP John McDonnell and environmentalists like Friends of the Earth.

Ferrovial, the Spanish firm that owns Heathrow, is pulling every string to make sure Gordon junks the Green agenda in favour of its business. It hired Tony Blair's former chief spokesman, Tom Kelly, to head "communications" for the British Airports Authority, its firm that runs the airport. And Brown's security adviser Lord Stevens is also a BAA director.

Meanwhile former Labour Energy Minister Brian Wilson is spearheading the lobbying effort as chair of Flyingmatters, a Ferrovial-funded pro-third runway body. Wilson has been touching all the right Brown buttons: Flyingmatters funded a meeting at the last Labour conference by Brown's favourite think tank, the Smith Institute. The meeting was nominally on "Going Green", but included Wilson as a speaker. His claim that attempts to limit flying were "impossibilist" and his advocacy of the third runway as compatible with his demands for more action on climate change caused incredulity among the audience and his fellow speakers, including Labour's Lord Whitty and Environment Agency boss Barbara Young. The chairman of the meeting was reduced to pleading: "This is rapidly turning into a bashing Brian exercise, which is very entertaining, but we need other questions." But Brian has had the last laugh. His arguments for the third runway might not have convinced Labour delegates, but they are convincing Gordon.

SOMEONE else who is convinced is Transport Secretary Ruth Kelly, whose gushing endorsement of the air lobby's arguments for Heathrow expansion is yet more evidence of the Labour hierarchy's commitment to tackling climate change.

Her "consultation" document telling people that Heathrow will get a third runway and sixth terminal was published a week after the high-speed railway between London and the Channel tunnel opened. But there was not a single reference to that railway in the entire 238-page document.

France's TGV system has savaged short-haul air services between key cities. The British Airports Authority (BAA), airlines and oil companies are determined to avoid that here, and it seems to be Kelly's duty as their mouthpiece in cabinet to prevent it. "My priority is to improve the experience of air passengers," she explained. "It is not simply the flight that matters. It's the journey to the airport, the time spent in the queue at check-in, security or immigration, and any delays spent on the aircraft waiting for a slot to take off. If you travel from London to Frankfurt for instance you will spend about 90 minutes in the air, yet the whole journey from one city centre to another takes about five hours."

What Kelly didn't mention was that you can now do London St Pancras to Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof by train in six hours, plus 30-minute check-in (10 minutes for business class). That includes changing trains at Brussels; and Deutsche Bahn (German state rail) is even reportedly considering direct London-Frankfurt trains in under five hours. As more people appreciate the environmental cost of flying, such trains could replace many Heathrow-Frankfurt flights (now about 22 a day each way).

A government policy of diverting short-haul travellers to trains would enable Heathrow to continue functioning without the massive upheaval of building another runway and terminal. But the "consultation" document on that upheaval doesn't even mention Britain's existing high-speed railway, let alone the proposed north-south one which could reduce the inordinate number of Heathrow slots used for shuttling people around Britain.

'Dr B. Ching'

BRUSSELS SPROUTS

THE likelihood is receding that OLAF, the EU's bungling anti-fraud arm, will ever face serious questions about its hounding of investigative journalist Hans-Martin Tillack. This is despite last week's European court of human rights ruling that Belgian police were wrong in 2002 to detain the German reporter and confiscate his files, following wholly unsubstantiated allegations of bribery made by OLAF *(Eyes passim)*.

More light could have been shed on the murky matter if the European parliament had followed up a 2005 EU ombudsman's finding that OLAF gave "incorrect and misleading statements" (ie lies) about the Tillack case. But a few days before the court of human rights judgment, the parliament quietly dropped its inquiry.

The decision not to look into OLAF was taken by the parliament's pompously-named conference of presidents, or political group leaders, who have the power to give special parliamentary reports the green light. A spokesman was unable to say why the investigation was quashed, but did say that the proposed OLAF report was one of a batch of 10 special reports considered by the conference in mid-November – and was the only one not given the go ahead.

EU-phemisms
THIS DEAL IS DESIGNED TO BENEFIT SOME OF THE MOST BACKWARD MEMBERS OF THE WORLD ECONOMY
E.U.-AFRICA TRADE DEAL 2007
RGJ
i.e. French Farmers

EYE TV

The TV Show (C4)
Points of View (BBC1)

AS PART of the fallout from the racism incidents on *Big Brother* and *Celebrity Big Brother*, Channel 4 pledged to the regulator that it would launch a regular show allowing the audience a right to reply, a tradition which C4 introduced to British TV but which had lapsed in recent years because access shows don't attract much advertising or many viewers.

On Saturday, this sop to Ofcom reached the screen as **The TV Show**, placed once a month in the prestigious mid-Saturday afternoon slot between the racing and repeats of *Time Team*. With a clock ticking down on screen to prove to beady modern viewers that the show is really going out live, Krishnan Guru-Murthy strides around a version of the old Kilroy set, with members of the public ranged on curved padded benches around him. "This is your show and we want to hear from you!" he pledged more than once.

Desperate to avoid the old BBC paternalism of reading out the letters of complaint in comic common accents, *The TV Show* mainly uses this studio audience, recruited through the website, although texts are also flashed up on screen ("Disgraceful – Midwife, Belfast") and the second half of the show is a live phone-in, which is risky because surely this show above all can't be caught fabricating guests.

Cheekily, the show began with a round-up of recent controversies in TV, all of which mysteriously involved the BBC or ITV rather than Channel 4: Jonathan Ross's dosh, the row over the Brenda documentary, Ant & Dec and so on.

In one corner of the studio, there's a sofa of shame, on which commissioning editors and executive producers from criticised programmes sit. Accused of causing distress to the tots taking part in *Supernanny*-type series, the exec begins with classic producer platitude number one, "that's a really good question", before explaining why what the broadcasters did was right. Challenged by a "community leader from Bradford" on the possibility that *Britz* perpetuated negative stereotypes of Islam, the commissioning editor responds with classic producer platitude number two: "There are a whole range of programmes available."

Apart from the refusal of programme-makers to admit to mistakes, the main problem Channel 4's new forum is likely to have is that, in a world of pod and blog in which every action of the mainstream media is suspected, the scrutiny show itself is likely to become the subject of furious scrutiny, until next month's edition becomes a commentary on the previous edition, with Guru-Murthy spending the next one discussing how Muslim issues are discussed on television.

The BBC's **Points of View**, which was paying lip-service to viewer accessibility long before such things became fashionable, recently had its first experience of this phenomenon. A pair of ill-fitting moleskin slacks worn by host Terry Wogan revealed the details of his penis in extreme detail, leading to the first ever installment of the show in which the letters have literally been about a lot of old cock.

For the December edition, Wogan was carefully framed only from paunch up, but the show was otherwise the usual reluctant submission to criticism by a corporation which has never really adjusted to the idea of audience opinion.

The cosiness of the proceedings is typified by the fact that the show is presented in front of a roaring fire in the Wogan living room in Berkshire, with Terry doing variations on his wireless shtick so that complaints about the series *Arrange Me A Marriage* are prefaced by a blarney link beginning: "The present Lady Wogan and meself have just marked 42 years of holy matrimony. But for those less lucky..."

To be fair, a lot of this flannel is designed to cover the fact that, with historical BBC arrogance, most of the producers of the criticised programmes seem to decline even to give a reply to the criticisms made.

In a nervous flirtation with the 21st century, Terry has on the sofa beside him a portable DVD player, on which videos recorded by viewers are played. But the picture and sound quality on these contributions are so poor the participants appear demented, which is probably the point.

As on *The TV Show*, the media reflex of balance means that a couple of rebukes from viewers about a particular show are always paired with the same number of submissions saying that the programme was the highlight of their life. Posing as objectivity, this tactic has the effect of suggesting that the broadcasters are getting things about right, which is what they instinctively believe and makes right-of-reply series, however they are constructed, finally pointless.

'Remote Controller'

DUMB BRITAIN

Capital Radio, London
Chris Brooks: What year was the term "disc jockey" first used?
Contestant: 1720.

TalkSport Radio
Mike Parry: Which high-profile South American president and outspoken critic of the US recently visited Iran?
Contestant: Ennio Morricone.

Mastermind, BBC2
John Humphrys: Who had their first hit in the British singles chart in 1963 with "Surfin' USA"?
Contestant: Er, the Sex Pistols.

MEDIA NEWS

WHY did ITV refuse a live broadcast for this week's British Comedy Awards? Phone-voting scandals are the official reason: a couple of years ago Ant and Dec's *Saturday Night Takeaway* "won" the People's Choice award even though more viewers actually voted (too late) for Catherine Tate.

But Ant and Dec's *Saturday Night Takeaway* has itself been caught out in a far bigger phone-fraud, as has *The X-Factor*, yet ITV carries on running them regardless. What really worried Michael Grade and his colleagues about this year's comedy awards was the certain knowledge that they'd be the butt of countless gags.

At first ITV told the awards' organiser, Michael Hurll Productions, that it wanted this year's ceremony cancelled altogether. Michael Hurll pointed out that ITV doesn't own the awards – merely the right to broadcast them. Hurll suggested that if ITV didn't want the programme he'd be happy to sell it to Channel 4 or the BBC, both of which had expressed an interest.

Michael Grade was aghast. He didn't want to show it, but still less did he want anyone else showing it. (As someone closely involved says, since the corruption scandals ITV executives have been "living in terror of being satirised".) So, to avoid being in breach of contract, he has had to shell out £750,000 to Michael Hurll Productions for this week's ceremony, in return for which he'll get a DVD of the event which may be shown on ITV sometime – or not, as the case may be. Worth every penny, no doubt.

Although a huge success, Eleni admits the marathon was no easy ride.
She said: "I was just getting over a virus and had to endure severe craps for about five miles."

Galloway News

OBSERVERS at an employment tribunal in Croydon have spent a week seeing the reputation of GMTV deputy editor Malcolm Douglas meticulously dissected as part of reporter Louise Port's case for unfair dismissal.

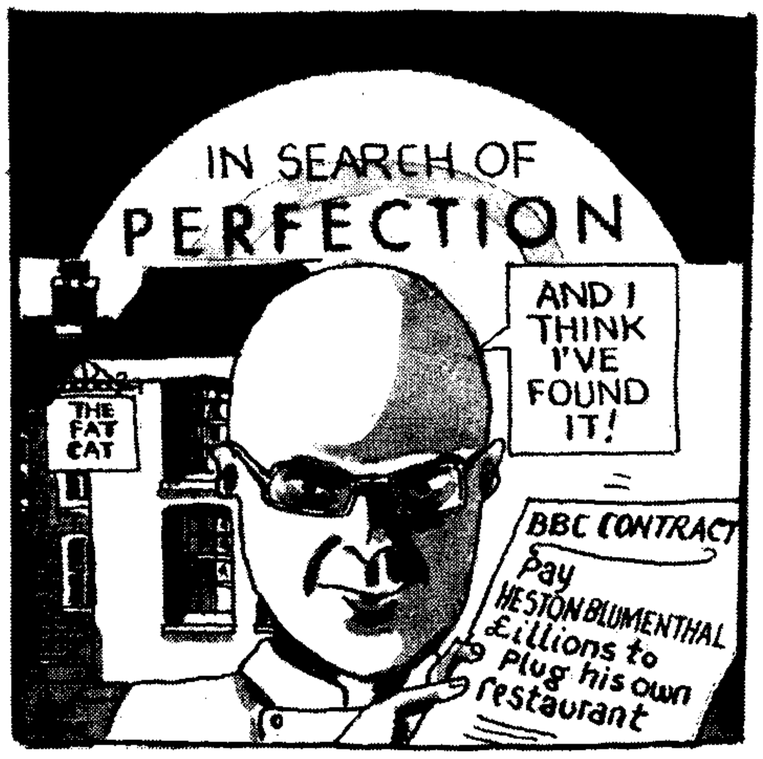
Port, a former companion of football manager Craig Brown, told the hearing that Douglas ran a deliberate campaign to force her out of her £38,000-a-year job because she was epileptic. His partner in crime, the tribunal heard, was none other than wine expert John Scammell, the managing editor, who was hostile to her when she asked to do day shifts to help manage her fits. Scammell had planned to join Douglas in the witness box... until m'learned friends remembered that he was a convicted drunk driver (*Eyes* passim).

Douglas's reputation as a kind, sensitive soul has been exposed to a relentless grinding down from Port's legal team, who are claiming nearly half a million pounds in damages for wrongful dismissal and disability discrimination. He was described as looking "shell-shocked" as he left the witness box.

Now he knows what it's like to have to answer a barrage of detailed questions in order to keep his job. His similarly supportive chats with former colleagues resulted in many leaving GMTV to go freelance. Douglas will no doubt spend Christmas looking forward to their appearance at the tribunal in January to give evidence about his modern management style.

Remarkably, Louise Port's lawyers have not yet asked about his commitment to health and safety matters, including GMTV's refusal to hire a local camera crew, with local knowledge, to support chief correspondent Richard Gaisford in Beirut during the Israeli invasion. The result was that Gaisford was "arrested" by a militia and came close to losing his life.

What did GMTV learn from the Gaisford case? It told him to do his own videoing in future. And he was later ordered out of editor Martin Frizzell's office for having the impudence to ask for a colleague to help him drive long distances involved in covering the disappearance of Madeleine McCann in Portugal.


IN SEARCH OF
PERFECTION
THE FAT CAT
AND I THINK I'VE FOUND IT!
BBC CONTRACT
Pay HESTON BLUMENTHAL £illions to plug his own restaurant

THE trawl for voluntary redundancies at BBC News has now attracted at least 350 positive replies, which is more than the number needed to balance the budget. But there's a catch.

Many of the volunteers don't come from areas where closures are needed. As a consequence, some are being refused permission to go.

Asked to provide "a summary of their work" for a selection panel, staff who are still intent on leaving the BBC's warm embrace deliberately sell themselves short, undermining their own careers in the hope of failing to meet the required standards needed to stay. These summaries have already been dubbed "suicide notes".

STAFF losing their jobs because there is no longer any money to pay for programme production can console themselves with a visit to the BBC's "Ready Steady... Shop" experience.

This offers "significant extra discounts on Apple products" and is only available to BBC employees – generously allowing them to buy the kit needed for their new roles elsewhere.

"Oi! You looking at my Byrds?"

LICENCE FEE-payers are funding a new series producer training programme at the BBC, launched in conjunction with The Research Centre.

This will not just be available to BBC staff. It will also be open to "freelance and independent producers based outside London" who currently don't work for the BBC but who may be commissioned to make programmes in the future... thereby filling the gaps left by those made redundant by the BBC because there is supposedly not enough work for them to do.

GIRLS ALOUD are among those posting messages of support for the anti-bullying campaign launched by the Beatbullying charity and YouTube.

"Happy slapping may be funny to you, until it is a member of your family sat at a bus stop being slapped," the pop group told youngsters.

And who better to endorse this initiative? In October 2003, Cheryl Tweedy of Girls Aloud was found guilty of assault after a punching a nightclub toilet attendant, Sophie Amogbokpa, who had tried to stop her from taking some lollipops for which she had not paid. Passing sentence, the judge said Tweedy had inflicted "an unpleasant piece of drunken violence which caused Sophie Amogbokpa pain and suffering. Her eye was painful for three or four weeks, there was bruising for three months and for a while she had blurred vision. You showed no remorse whatsoever." There's charity!

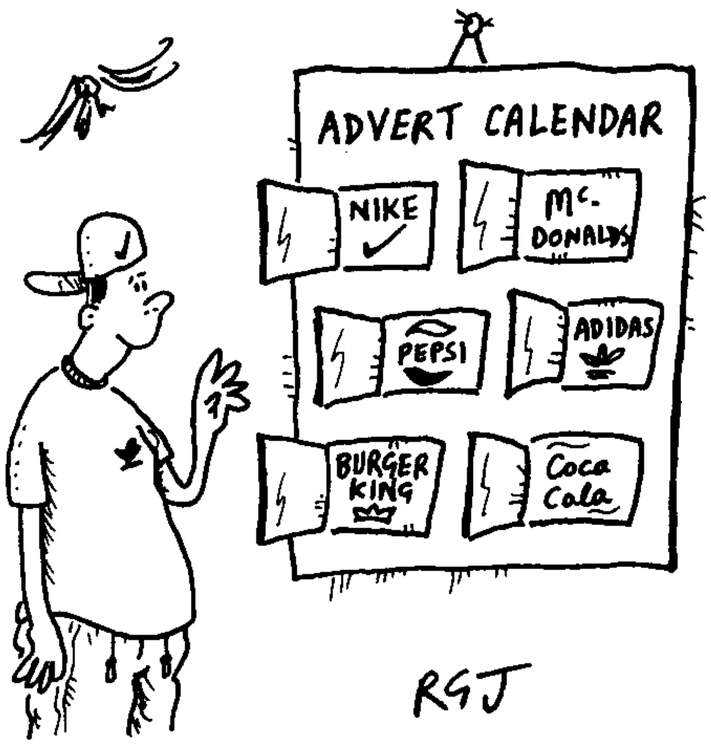
AD NAUSEAM

THE Post Office's latest campaign, courtesy of ad agency Mother, features a sub-postmaster geeing up his staff about the marvellous service provided to locals. Then, for no obvious reason, Joan Collins appears as the first customer of the day.

With 2,500 branches of the Post Office earmarked for closure, the £10m spent on this marketing splurge might have been better used keeping them open.

Nowhere has this irony been more keenly felt than in Richmond, south London. Earlier this year, an empty corner shop on Richmond Hill came to life with new signage in the Post Office's logo. Locals were cockahoop – the old Post Office, three shops down, closed in 2003 despite protests and pensioners had to traipse down the hill to Richmond town and up to the first floor of WH Smiths, as the main Post Office there has also been closed.

Alas, their joy was premature. The corner shop was in fact a mock-up Post Office for the new ads. No sooner had Joan Collins done her turn than this so-called "People's Post Office", extolling its virtues of localised, personal service, was rapidly dismantled. Not unlike the real "People's Post Office" three doors down.

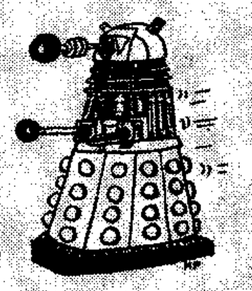


BIRTSPEAK 2.0

"As basic data is commoditized, it's insight that people are looking for... a lot of that insight may reside in other vertical pillars (ie blogs)...

"Everyone is going to bleed out into multimedia and these boxes that companies have grown up in, that's over. Everybody will be multiplatform, multimedia, monetizing in each other's space and it's going to be an exciting world."

– Speech by Devin Wenig, Chief Operating Officer, Reuters



LIBEL NEWS

MANY London solicitors have been bemused to receive from Messrs Carter-Fuck an unsolicited copy of *Get Carter-Fuck*, the firm's newsletter. Presumably the hope is that lawyers who don't do defamation cases will be so impressed by the chronicle of triumph that they'll urge would-be libel litigants to hire Carter-Fuck forthwith.

But how impressive is it? The entire front page of this "Winter 2007" edition is filled with a story headlined "BBC Pays Lady Falkender £75,000 Over 'Lavender List' Slurs" – a reference to a Carter-Fuck case that was settled way back in the first week of April. Readers might almost infer that Carter-Fuck has had no more noteworthy victories in the eight months since.

Inside is another glorious item of Carter-Fuck news: "In August, the *Daily Mail* described the firm as 'London's best known and most feared libel lawyers'..." No mention, however, of the context: a scathing attack on Commons Speaker Michael Martin for hiring the "very expensive" Carter-Fuck to issue press releases on his behalf at a cost to the taxpayer of £21,500 – not exactly good publicity for either the Speaker or his lucre-loving lawyers.

And there's more: "Jeremy Paxman singled out Carter-Ruck for special mention in his much-publicised speech at the Edinburgh International television festival." Again, no further detail is given – and no wonder. Here's what Paxman actually said: "To get a single – important – film transmitted [on *Newsnight*] last week involved surviving a sustained barrage of astonishingly threatening lawyers' letters from Carter-Ruck..." Ah, *that* sort of "special mention".

Finally, the back page of the newsletter is brightened with a photo of lingerie model Sophie Anderton – whom Carter-Fuck is advising "in a number of matters". Whoops! Just after the newsletter was dispatched, the *News of the Screws* exposed this esteemed client as a coke-snorting prostitute who charges punters £10,000 a night for sex. She was promptly sacked by Fake Bake, a fake-tan firm which had used her as its frontwoman, for bringing herself and the firm into disrepute.

Perhaps Sophie's solicitors will come to the rescue by officially appointing her as "the face of Carter-Fuck". Anyone who charges £10,000 a night is surely a woman after their own hearts.

SUPERMODELS

KERBER

MUMMY, CAN YOU BUY ME SOME PERFUME FOR CHRISTMAS?
CERTAINLY NOT. YOU'RE SIX YEARS OLD!!!
.....BRING OUT YOUR OWN PERFUME RANGE LIKE MOST GIRLS THESE DAYS!

ROTTEN BOROUGHS

DEEP IN THE SKIP

LAST month, when Pakistan's President Musharraf declared a state of emergency and sent police thugs to crack the skulls of protesting lawyers, Foreign Secretary David Miliband gave him a lecture on democracy.

Musharraf should be "absolutely clear" that promised elections would go ahead "on a free and fair basis" he said sternly. Closer to home, however, in Miliband's South Shields constituency, many voters are concerned about the freeness and fairness of last May's local elections to South Tyneside council, although their MP has yet to give them the benefit of his opinion.

Inspector Knacker was called in after the Labour council admitted – six months after the elections – that 18 ballot boxes, containing hundreds of rejected postal votes, had gone missing. The cock-up – if that is what it was – came to light after Independent election candidate Ahmed Khan failed in a legal attempt to inspect a mere 88 rejected postal votes from the Beacon and Bents ward, where he lost in May to the Labour candidate by just 33 votes.

Independent group leader Jane Branley told the *Eye* she thought the council's explanation – that the votes, which are meant to be kept under lock and key for a year, had probably been chucked in a skip – was "ludicrous". Given Labour's record on looking after confidential information elsewhere, it might just be as simple, and shocking, as that.

● HM REVENUE and Customs may have hit the national headlines by losing the confidential bank details of half the population of Britain, but local government can hold its own when it comes to compromising the security of the taxpayer. More than a week before the child benefit CDs lost-in-the-post cock-up came to light, workers at a carpet company near Barnsley discovered hundreds of confidential council documents relating to benefit claims in a skip, including names, addresses, telephone numbers and bank and credit card numbers. The skip belonged to a waste company which also has a contract with Labour-controlled Barnsley council. After the council sent an officer round with a bin liner to collect the dumped data, it issued a statement urging locals to "have confidence that the council takes its responsibilities seriously for the safeguarding of confidential and sensitive information". So that's all right, then!

MOORE THE MERRIER

MORE funny financial goings-on at Redcar and Cleveland council (R&C). The last *Eye* told how acting chief executive Ray Richardson ensured that a damaging Audit Commission report into his management of council finances was withdrawn. Until the *Eye* put the original report on its website, many R&C councillors had never seen it.

Now, interesting documents seen by the *Eye* reveal that on 23 November last year Richardson used "delegated powers" to award a extra eight days paid holiday to the man he replaced – outgoing chief executive Colin Moore. Moore's salary at the time was approximately £150,000 a year, so the deal was worth about £3,000. Elected councillors – who might normally be expected to sign-off remunerative packages for senior officers – were not informed until April this year, by which time Moore, who left the council soon afterwards, had already taken his extra hols. Nice one.

● THIS week's triumph from the Standards Board for England comes from Kirklees in West Yorkshire, where the SBE has determined to take "no further action" against Cllr Mehboob Khan, leader of the Labour group on the council, even though he admitted running up a bill of more than £1,300 on the council's phones after making a series of personal late-night calls to a "friend" in, er, Kazakhstan. The SBE's "ethical standards officer" concluded that, because the council didn't appear to have a "policy or protocol" on the reimbursement of late night calls to Kazakhstan, and because Khan had agreed to repay the money once he was found out, there was no case to answer. PS: Any other result might have been a tad embarrassing for the 12-member Standards Board, given that Cllr Khan sits on it.

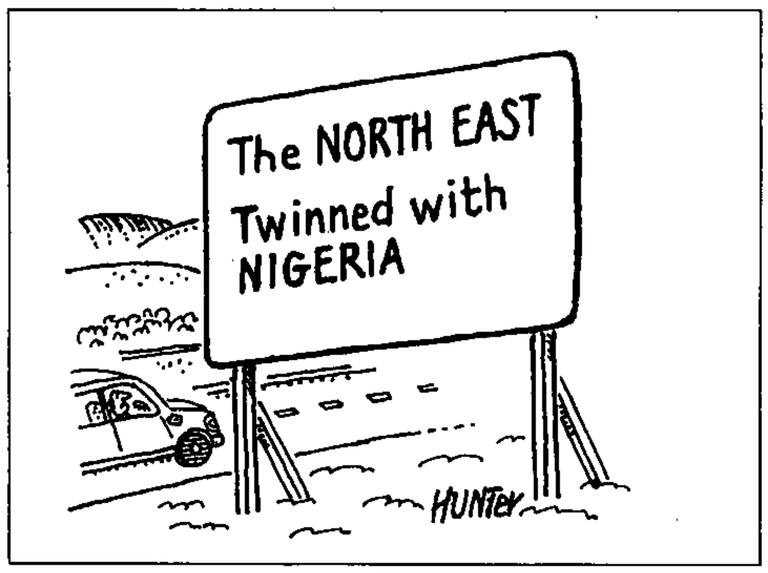
DAVY JONES'S MUCKER

SOME people still do have faith in the Standards Board, however. Such as David Jones, Labour leader of Oldham metropolitan borough council.

One of Jones's Labour councillors, Ali Aqeel Salamat, was last month fined £500 with £1,000 costs for claiming council tax benefit while failing to declare his income as a councillor. He was also working as a taxi driver. At the time Cllr Salamat's little fiddle came to light in 2005 he was a Liberal Democrat councillor. The Lib Dems suspended him, then deselected him ahead of last year's council elections, but he continued to sit on the council as an independent.

This year's elections left the council with no party in overall control – which seemed to Cllr Jones the right moment to welcome Cllr Salamat into the Broon corner, despite the fraud case hanging over him. Now that Salamat has been convicted, Jones is still standing by him. "He will remain a councillor until we hear from the Standards Board," he says. "It all depends on whether he is disbarred. We are in their hands." Jones also sees no irony in Cllr Salamat continuing to sit on the council's audit committee, nor in his being a (Jones-nominated) "community champion", for which he is paid an additional allowance.

Cllr Jones clearly has trouble distinguishing right from wrong, but he does understand

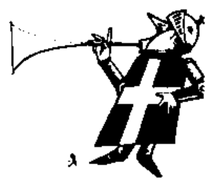


arithmetic. Labour, with 31 seats on Oldham council, currently has a two-seat majority over the Lib Dems and Tories combined. If Salamat were to stand down, and with two other Labour councillors currently facing serious criminal charges which have yet to come to court, Labour's majority – and Jones's position as council leader – might be threatened. And that would never do.

JOB AD OF THE WEEK

"Would you like to Champion [*sic*] high quality bus services and can you make a significant change to customer-focused service?"
– *Worcester News.*

Translation: Worcestershire county council is looking for a bus driver.



EYE TOLD YOU SO

NEARLY three years after a Rotten Boroughs story alerted Isle of Wight council to the risks of employing engineering consultants High-Point Rendel (H-PR) to solve its Undercliff Drive coast road erosion (*Eye* 1125), the authority has dumped the company.

A year-long £2m inquiry established illegal tendering procedures and flouting of regulations and saw five senior officials sent packing, including Derek "Irritable" Rowell, who was in overall charge of H-PR's work on the island and, formerly, at Scarborough borough council.

The *Eye* pointed out remarkable similarities between the Wight experience and that of Scarborough, whose dealings with H-PR over a multi-million-pound coastal defence scheme were condemned by the Audit Commission and in an independent report (*Eyes passim*).

None of this had been spotted either by the IoW's dozy councillors or their chief executive, Joe "Vera" Duckworth, as the Undercliff Drive project's budget crept up from its 2001 estimate of £5.6m to its 2005 figure of £13m, without a murmur from County Hall.

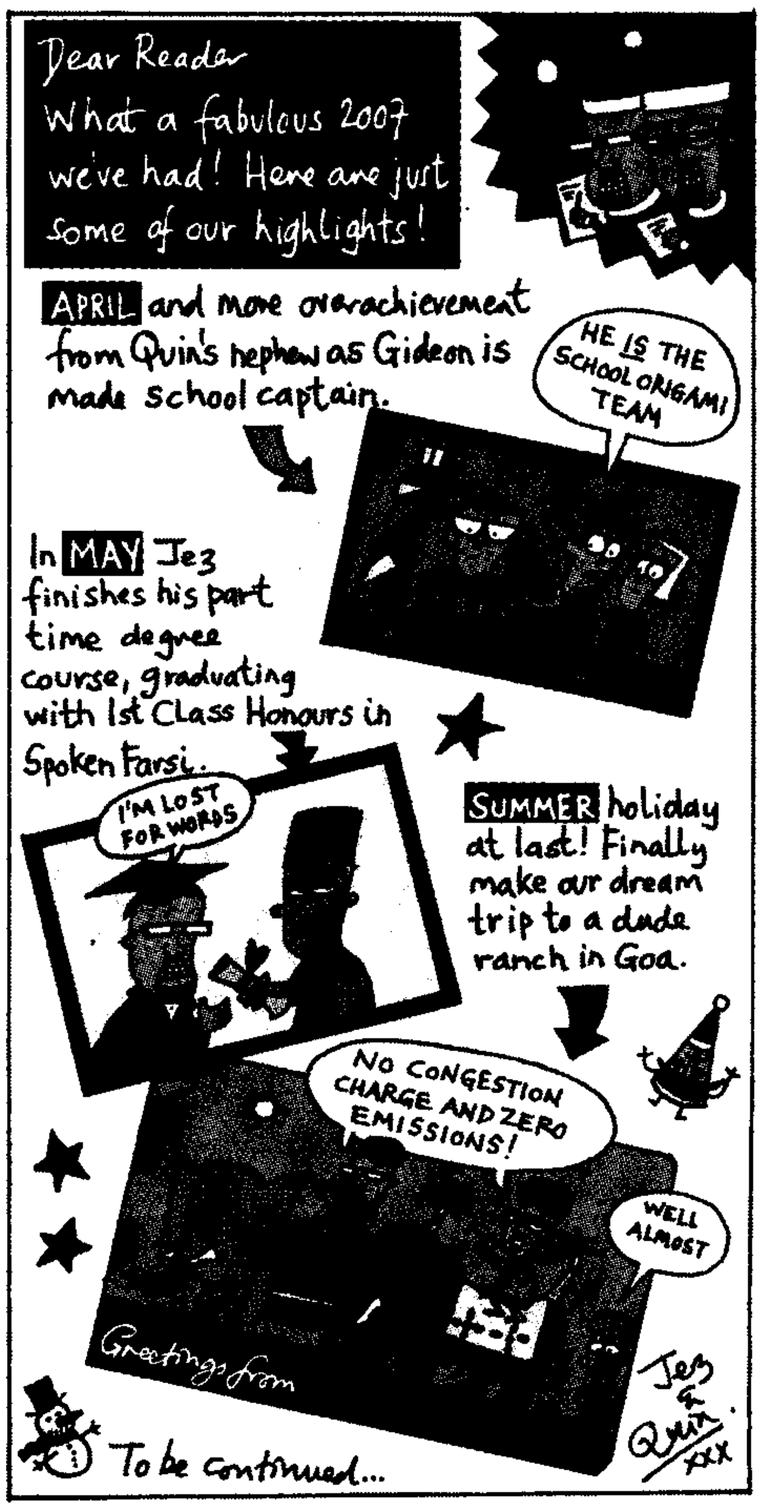
Once jogged awake by our story, however, Vera acted swiftly to set up the inquiry. At the time he counselled councillors to refrain from comment lest they jeopardise the proceedings... but in the next breath ignored his own advice by opining H-PR was, in his view, above reproach.

He had less to say (ie nothing) as he watched the council boot "irreproachable" H-PR into touch at its November meeting, where it was revealed the estimate for its roadworks had now reached an eye-watering £18m. It also emerged that no independent appraisal of H-PR's proposed solutions had been undertaken by the dimwits it has subsequently cost the taxpayer nearly £2m to get rid of.

● THE London Borough of Newham is consulting residents, it announces, *after* selecting the Swan Housing Group as its "preferred partner" to deliver a £55m PFI project to refurbish 1,400 homes in Forest Gate, in the East End. "We will consider all the comments we receive before signing the contract," says Cllr Andrew Baikie, Newham's "executive member for housing". So it's a done deal, then. And no doubt a feather in the cap of Swan's "new business director", Kamal Faizi, who was until last year, er, director of housing at Newham council (*Eye* 1173).

GRIM ROUND ROBIN LETTER (PART 1)

KNIFE & PACKER


Dear Reader
What a fabulous 2007 we've had! Here are just some of our highlights!
APRIL and more overachievement from Quin's nephew as Gideon is made school captain.
HE IS THE SCHOOL ORIGAMI TEAM
In MAY Jez finishes his part time degree course, graduating with 1st Class Honours in Spoken Farsi.
I'M LOST FOR WORDS
SUMMER holiday at last! Finally make our dream trip to a dude ranch in Goa.
NO CONGESTION CHARGE AND ZERO EMISSIONS!
WELL ALMOST
Greetings from
Jez & Quin xxx
To be continued...

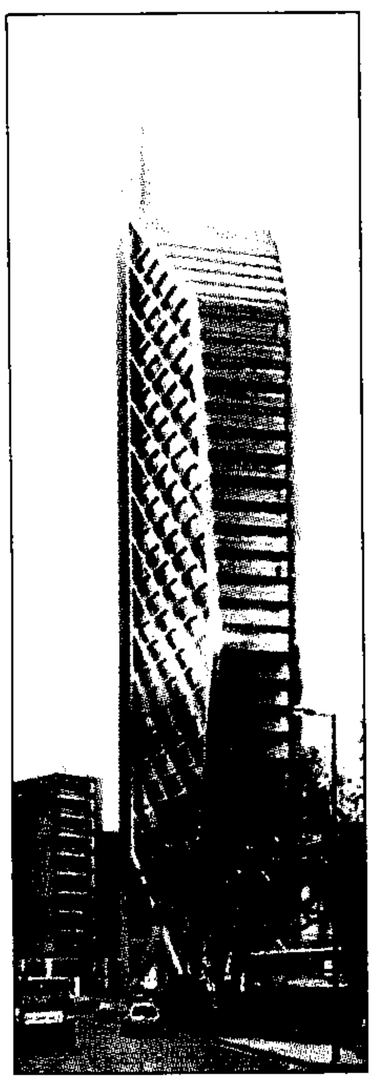
NOOKS and CORNERS

IS NOWHERE safe? The latest victim of the Norman Foster charm offensive is Ealing, west London, where a massive commercial and residential development is proposed for the Broadway, opposite the railway station, complete with a 40-storey tower designed by Foster & Partners.

An earlier scheme for the development having run into trouble, the Irish developer Glenkerrin wheeled in Foster to charm opponents and smooth away difficulties with the planning authorities. And, of course, London mayor Ken Livingstone has let it be known he loves tall buildings and thinks every London borough should have one.

So does Ealing deserve 20,000 square metres of shop space, 1,100sq m of offices, 704 residential units and 394 car-parking spaces squeezed into its centre? Ealing may be suburban, at the far end of the District and Central lines, but it has a character of its own. It has Soane's Pitzhanger Manor; it still has an open space in the centre – Haven Green (which will be overshadowed by the 40-storey tower); and it is still human in scale (in other words, it's not yet like Croydon).

When, 30 years ago, Ealing was threatened by comprehensive redevelopment, controversy ensured that the resulting Ealing Broadway Centre was not overweening. Designed by Francis Roberts of the Building Design Partnership, it was a thoughtful, if vulgar, exercise in the new Neo-Vernacular. To quote the relevant new *Buildings of England* volume, it is "one of the first cases where, as a result of local pressure, the usual package of covered shopping malls, lucrative offices, and multi-storey car parks was designed to make a deliberately picturesque approach to the town centre".



But that approach is sneered at these days, in the current architectural climate of Modernist Revival, rampant High Tec and the puerile macho obsession with tall buildings. So Foster's firm is hired to create a landmark, an "icon" – something "visionary" that's a funny shape and not a conventional tall building – to distract attention from the crude over-development of the rest of the site. The proposed tower sports lots of shiny metal, appears to be in two asymmetrical halves, is tapering and faceted and lurches in and out in an excitingly gravity-defying way. Not, of course, that this masterpiece is designed by Foster himself: he charges extra for that personal touch.

But not everyone is impressed. More than 20 residents' associations and local bodies have come together to oppose the Glenkerrin scheme which, they point out, offers little or no improvement on shops and leisure facilities currently available, fails to offer any improvement in public transport and does not connect with the railway station (which might one day serve Crossrail). Even CABE, the Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment, which normally grovels to Foster, has criticisms. While accepting the principle of tall buildings on the site (why?), and considering the Foster tower "has the potential to be of sufficient architectural distinction", it is less happy about the three "finger blocks" which will bridge the railway next to Haven Green and is "not yet convinced that the scheme works together as a whole".

Why there is such reverence for the ruthless international design machine that bears the Foster name is one of the mysteries of the age. Until the 1980s he was just another fashionable modernist, an ambitious, arrogant, High Tech genius on the make. Then came Stansted Airport – an elegant shed, but no great shakes in terms of getting on aeroplanes – and even conservative, conservation-minded critics began to drool.

Meanwhile, all power to those who are trying to stop poor old Ealing being given a gratuitous masterpiece. It is, of course, but one of many show-off tall buildings which currently threaten London and other cities. In fact, with Gordon Brown in power busy dismantling our planning controls – sorry, making them more "flexible" – and caring not a toss for history or culture, and with Ken Livingstone getting over-excited about giant erections, anyone who cares about architecture and loves Britain must hope the forthcoming recession comes soon.

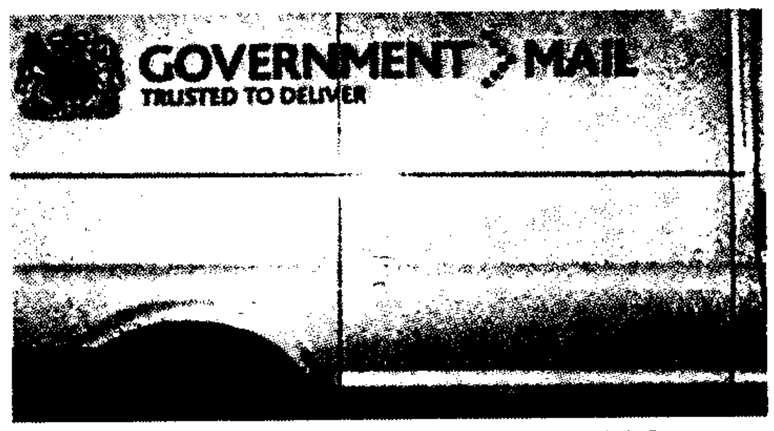
TALKING of gratuitous masterpieces, the competition-winning architects of the Museum of Liverpool, the Danish practice 3XN, have been dropped from the vexed and topographically inane project (Eyes 1185 and 1129).

There have been problems over the budget (what a surprise) and the squashed shoebox which will now disfigure Pierhead and the World Heritage Site will now be faced in cheaper Jura limestone rather than travertine. And other changes are demanded. "We are truly saddened," says the architect Kim Nielsen, "and we believe that this situation is very regrettable to the project and to the city of Liverpool".

Must beware of Schadenfreude as Liverpool's stint as European City of Culture descends yet further into farce…

'Piloti'

I-SPY *Central London*



Submitted by Frank Maher. £10 paid for similar submissions. *(SAE required for return of photographs)*

MUSIC & MUSICIANS

THOSE who bother to monitor these things might have noticed how Britain's big, new glossy arts venues tend to have a big, new, glossy way of announcing how wonderfully well they're doing. So glossy that we miss the truth behind the shine.

Take the Welsh Millennium Centre at Cardiff Bay, that grand, swanky barn of a building launched three years ago at a cost of £106m and looking from the start like something that was more a political statement than viable proposition. Sure, it provided a much-needed home for Welsh National Opera. But what would happen in so vast an acreage when opera wasn't playing? And who, from outside Cardiff, would turn up night after night at this supposedly international performance centre?

Stuff and nonsense, said the WMC administrators, camouflaging the fact that hardly anybody treks into Cardiff Bay except from the immediate area. Then only two months ago they made a huge song and dance about their achievement in notching up £20m in ticket sales and "meeting our financial targets". It was all balloons, champagne and plans for architectural expansion to make a glittering new home for the National Orchestra of Wales.

But oh dear – a few weeks later and the truth leaks from an auditor's report that the centre is actually £13.5m in debt and, according to KPMG, facing "significant doubt" about its ability "to continue as a going concern".

Instead of stopping to ask how the centre could be declaiming its success one month and be on the verge of insolvency the next, the Welsh heritage minister has instantly come running to the rescue with £13.5m to erase the debt – which, given the political egg that would attach to his face if the WMC went down, is understandable. But the haste with which this money has been found, from supposedly unspent funds in the Welsh Assembly hoard, may not be the wisest response to a crisis that's likely to recur. There are real questions about the purpose and viability of the WMC and they need real answers. Not PR.

LESS expensively there are questions too about the way the South Bank Centre has been talking itself up since it reopened in the summer.

Those who were at the launch remember artistic director Jude Kelly proclaiming her allegiance to classical music and listing the festivals and concert series we could look forward to. It sounded fine but the promises turn out to be a mite thin.

Take the emphatically announced "six-month festival" of work by composer Luigi Nono. Six months of Nono, we all thought: that's serious (perhaps more serious than anybody needs). But what's this? A string of concerts in October followed by… nothing in November, nothing in December, nothing in Jan, Feb, Mar or even April, and then the performance of a single final piece in May. Some "six-month festival" that turned out to be.

'Lunchtime O'Boulez'

YOUNG BRITISH ARTISTS

BY BIRCH

£20,000 for the lucky winner!
NEW NORTHERN ARTS PRIZE: SHORTLIST UNVEILED AT LEEDS ART GALLERY.
WILL HELP CORRECT METROPOLITAN BIAS.
They'll be able to move down to London with that.
NEW NORTHERN PRIZE:

Letters

Bourn hungry

Sir,

As a non UK resident and an infrequent visitor to London, I always value your restaurant recommendations.

I have, therefore, followed with great excitement each instalment of the John Bourn series, which for me has become a little like the Da Vinci Code tours. Wiltons for lunch and Gorings for dinner on one day was – for me at least – a memorable day of classic gourmet British food.

Many thanks, and keep up the good work.

Sincerely,
JAMES PRESTON,
Madrid, Spain.

Latin and geek

Sir,

In reply to Helen Elsom (Letters, 1198), if the shade of Virgil is blushing, it will be doing so not at being quoted by the prophet Enoch, but at the apparent state of Classics in Cambridge: the Sibyl in Aeneid 6 is not referring to the Catilinarian conspiracies, there was only one such conspiracy in any case (63 BC), and Virgil was in fact alive at the time (born 70 BC).

Yours pedantically,
DOMINIC BERRY
Senior Lecturer in Classics, University of Edinburgh.

Sir,

Where on earth does Helen Elsom (Letters, 1198) get the idea that the Sibyl in Aeneid VI foresees the Catiline conspiracy, which she claims occurred before Virgil's birth? For the record, what the Sibyl foresees are the wars that are to fill the rest of the epic, between the Trojans and the native Italians. And Virgil was seven at the time of the Catiline to-do, in 63 BC.

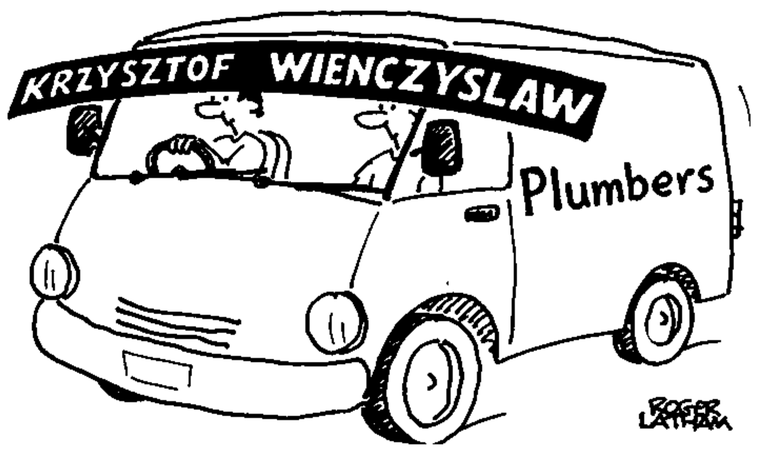
But I agree about Juvenal. Written nearly 2,000 years ago, the satires of Juvenal sound all too modern. The worship of Mammon as the greatest god, gambling addiction, boy racers, gay marriages, drug-dealers and temple-robbers, loss of belief in an afterlife, corrupt rulers, dishonesty the norm, adultery the norm, the whole place so overrun by immigrants that there's "no room in Rome for a Roman", unaffordable housing, insomnia caused by excessive street noise, exhaustion of fish stocks, no one policing the police, bread and circuses, no respect for the old, overpaid athletes, cannibalism, the sense of living in a totally dehumanised "ninth age" – it's all there. Juvenal is as much a must-read for our time as Private Eye.

Yours faithfully,
GRAHAM CHAINEY,
Brighton.

Sir,

Whatever we may think of old Enoch, the parallel he was drawing couldn't have been clearer. The Sibyl is speaking of the Trojan refugees' reception in Italy after defeat at the hands of the Greeks: "But they will wish they had not come. I see battles, terrible battles, and the Tiber foaming with much blood. The cause of such great trouble for the Trojans will be once more, as before, a marriage between a local girl and a foreign husband." (Virgil's Aeneid VI, lines 86/87 and 93/94).

BRIAN MINSHALL,
Pontypridd.



LUVVIES

But when you are in a scene with another actor, and you are both completely present in another world, and you've created, out of nothing, a situation that feels limitless... at those moments, it feels kind of profound.

SIMON WOODS,
Guardian Weekend

Submitted by Una McCanton.

An occasional column devoted to gems from the acting profession. £10 paid for entries.

Second opinions

Sir,

Far be it from me to disagree with M.D. and his assessment of the Notional Institute for Clinical Expediency (Denying the dying, Pt 2, 1198), but he should not really descend to their level of spurious arguments.

Sadly, even the best palliative drug cannot justify its cost by keeping patients out of hospital. All it can do is delay the time until such terminal care becomes necessary. Meanwhile, apart from the relative few who return to paid employment, they need social support and care for longer. Likewise, whatever the Karolinska Institute might have said, our higher death rates cannot be due to lack of palliative drugs. At best, the introduction of these could bring about a temporary reduction in death rates until the palliation period is over, eventually they will not prevent one death.

These misapprehensions do, however, point up the flaw in NICE's reasoning process. Whether a drug is cost effective or not comes down mostly to how much value is placed on the extra period of remission or symptom control. Arguments based on any balance of purely economic factors are simply an attempt to divert the argument from this value-judgement, which cannot have a purely scientific basis. Yes, we need debate on this issue, unless the taxpayer is prepared to give oncology services a blank cheque; but let us not let the debate be distracted by spurious arguments.

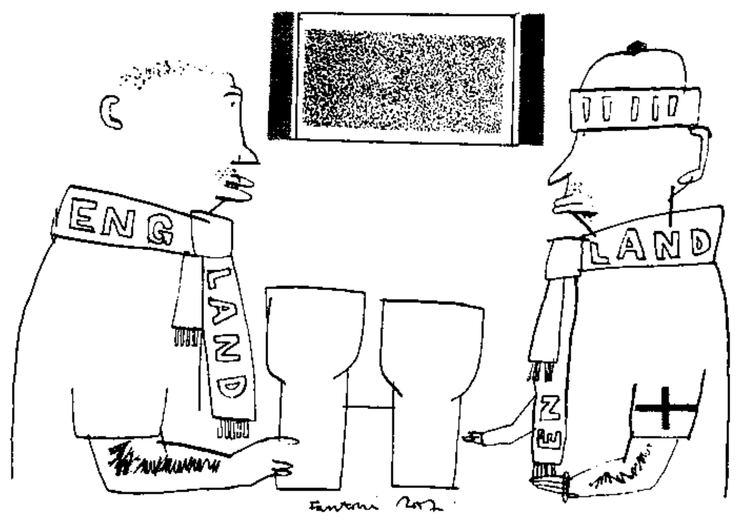
DR JON GURR,
Via email.

Sir,

To lose a son to cancer at the age of 29 is a tragedy, but M.D.'s telling of the story twisted a few facts. Cancer charities did not develop Avastin – Genentech, a large Californian company founded by venture capitalists did. Avastin's huge cost is not offset by reduced cost of terminal care in NHS hospitals, it only delays it by an average of 3.3 months. (That is not to say that three months of life is not valuable, but the argument for Avastin based on cost savings does not add up.) And Avastin is available in the US – but only if paid for by the patient or by the insurance plan that they have paid for: payment for Avastin on Medicaid (their miniature version of the NHS) is patchy as it is in the UK, for the same cost reasons. But Genentech is not an ogre, their website says, and if patients cannot afford Genentech drugs they can apply to the Genentech Access to Care program to get it for free: I suggest patients in countries with health systems like England's write to Genentech laying out their case.

Yours,
WILLIAM BAINS,
Royston, Herts.

Scenes You Seldom See



"All things considered, I'd say Steve McClaren did a pretty good job"

Getting the bird

Sir,

Has Muckspreader been sniffing the silage again? Why should it be a surprise that bird populations are increasing on Royal Society for the Protection of Birds reserves: that's what nature reserves are for, and the RSPB is very good at managing them. But to put this success down to predator control is illogical; after all there's no shortage of gun-toting yokels in the wider countryside where the wildlife has disappeared. The key part of the RSPB's work in places like East Anglia is to restore marshland and other habitats ravaged by 50 years of intensive farming.

The RSPB has never pretended to be an animal welfare organisation, but if they have carried out some local culling it would only be to protect some extremely vulnerable species. If you've only got 40 pairs of lapwings it makes sense to guard them closely. Don't forget that nature reserves can be like oases of wildlife in a barren desert of agriculture.

Now we come to Muckspreader's home-spun ecology lesson, that the countryside is only there because of farmers, and the balance of nature can only be maintained by the intervention of man. How then did our wildlife survive say 4,000 years ago when man wasn't in a position to control the countryside? Why weren't there plagues of magpies and foxes and badgers and all the other animals so hated by Muckspreader and his farming chums?

The truth is that any imbalances in nature were created by man in the first place, and if we do have to intervene it is only to counteract the effects of mankind's disastrous abuse of the environment, not least industrialised farming methods.

Regards,
JASON HEATH,
Ivybridge.

"People smuggling? What gives you that idea?"

Photo opportunity

Sir,

Following HMRC's loss of computer discs containing personal data, which may possibly put thousands of parents at risk of identity theft and all that entails, do you by any chance have a photo depicting a couple who have been robbed of almost everything, except the underwear they stand up in?

Yours,
PETER TUCKER,

Via email.

Baton charge

Sir,

Flattered as I am to be rapped over the knuckles by Maestro O'Boulez's baton (Music & Musicians, 1198), he is being unfair. We at Gramophone may have been briefly duped by the Joyce (er, not Joan, Maestro O'Boulez) Hatto fraud – but had we published accusations that turned out to be wrong, or even stopped reviewing the discs on that basis, the local bobbies would have been knocking on our door rather than Mr Barrington-Coupe's. As soon as we had definite proof, after running extensive and, I might say, expensive tests involving experts in three countries, we broke the story – providing excellent fodder for your own Maestro's column. I would have hoped, however, that the Hatto fraud on its own was bizarre enough that he wouldn't have to manufacture a new angle... that said, a conductor's (and perhaps, on occasion, a journalist's) job is all about free interpretation.

Yours harmoniously,
JAMES INVERNE,

Editor, Gramophone.

Dumb and Dumberer

Sir,

I read with interest the example of the general standard of ignorance in our fine land from the Radio Clyde Breakfast Show (Dumb Britain, 1198). However, I could not decide who was the more ignorant – the contestant for thinking that Harry Potter was a famous detective or the presenter for thinking that Agatha Christie wrote "The Hound of the Baskervilles"!

Yours incredulously,
GEOFF BUDD,

Reading.

Sir,

Nah, Harry Potter wasn't the famous detective in Agatha Christie's "The Hound of the Baskervilles". My guess is that it was either Sherlock Poirot or Hercule Holmes.

H. TAYLOR,

Via email.

● Thank you for the 94,000 letters pointing out the double-dumbness on Radio Clyde. Ed.

SOLUTIONS

"KCC Door Hardware and Security Solutions" – *keys*

"Plasticase: Stylish and Affordable Carrying Solutions" – *suitcases*

"Torex Retail Petroleum & Convenience Solutions Europe focuses exclusively on providing automation solutions for the Petroleum Retailer" – *petrol pumps*

All submitted by readers

Lookalike

Brian

Oliver

Sir

Considering the fact that the Chief Exec of the FA, Mr Brian Barwick, has landed the England football team in yet another fine mess it seems very apt that he appears to so closely resemble to that other famously portly clown, Mr Oliver Hardy. Could they be related?

MARTYN ANDREW

Via email.

Colemanballs

£10 paid for contributions

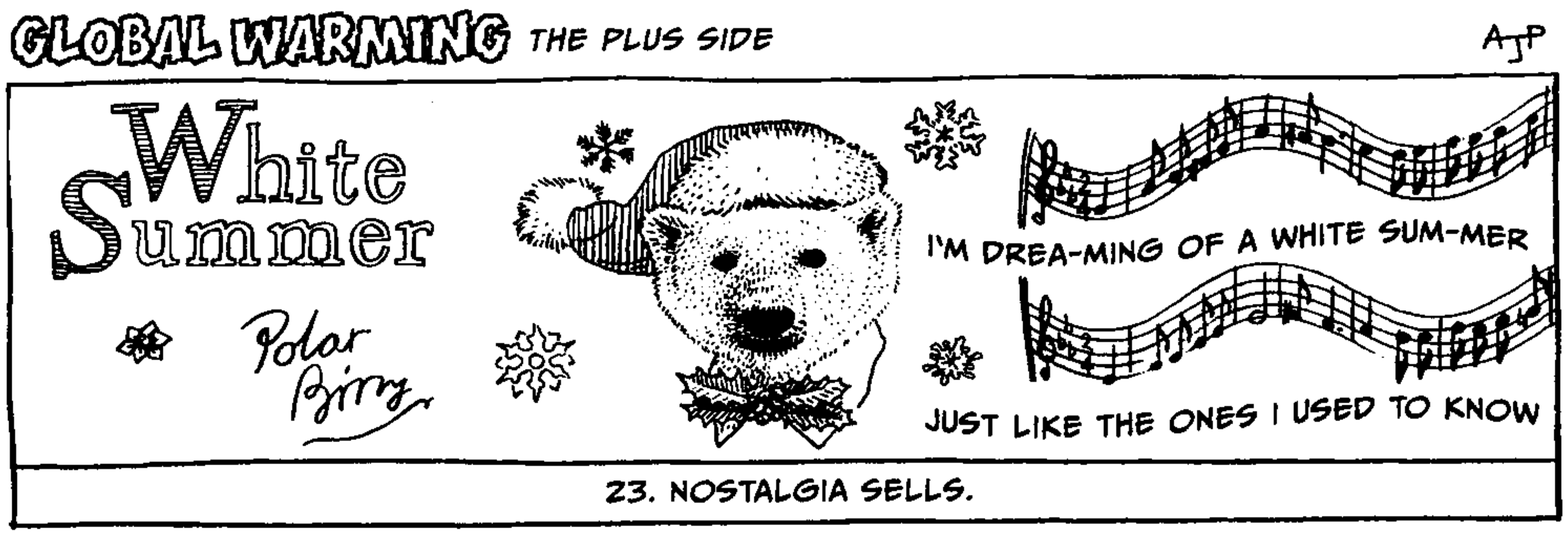
"... and Hull City, to use a pun, have really got their tails up."
Commentator, Radio Lancashire
(Stuart Miller)

"The man who killed Jill Dando wins his appeal against his conviction..."
PETER LEVY, BBC Look North
(Barbara Lavender)

"The Indians will have their reservations about how they have played this."
BRUCE YARDLEY, Sky Sports
(Steve Poxton)

"Setanta's not just about football. We have the PGA golf and the Scottish Premier League..."
RICHARD BROOKE, Radio 5 Live
(Graham McDonald)

"Puyol there at the back; he's the Rock of Gibraltar for Spain."
RAY HUDSON, Go!TV (US)
(Ian Underhill)



Pedants' Corner

Sir,

May I join the chorus pointing out what is surely only a misprint rather than mathematical illiteracy (Signal Failures, Eye 1198)?

Unless the DTI is indeed enlisting the prognostication services of Doris Stokes, I think you intend to say that $35 was the "median" (not the medium) projection [for future crude oil prices].

Yours,
RUSSELL GREENE,

Balham, London.

Sir,

Shurely your reviewer of Miss Herbert (Literary Review, 1198) had Finnegans Wake in mind and not Ulysses as one example of "inhuman" and "writer-writing" genre. Ulysses is the funniest and most "human" book I know.

Molly Bloom (to take just one example) seems very hot and human to me. Much more so than the celebrated Glenda Slagg and incidentally much more explicit than Private Eye reviewers could ever be. Granted there are wordplay sections in Ulysses, but they keep close company with the "dirty brutes" of humankind.

Yours then, "till the waters come down at Lahore",
L. LAVERY,

Lisburn, Co. Antrim.

Sir,

In "Another leak stew" (Eye 1196: yes, I'm a slow reader) you wax most scientifically on organophosphates, carcinogens and immuno-suppressants leaking into the cabin and/or cockpit of "BAE's infamous 146 aircraft".

*Any anorak will know that the 146 is normally powered by **four** LF507 turbofans, whereas the illustrative aircraft photographed for your article quite clearly has only **two** engines still attached.*

Does the 146 suffer from an even more serious problem, and, if so, shouldn't we be told?

Keep up your good work.

Your worried pedant,
DR J.R. LOUDON,

Brentwood, Essex.

Sir,

As a regular subscriber for 10 years I look forward to the pedantic corrections of many of your readers. I am now part of this hallowed group as I feel the need to correct your criticism of the altimeter used on the E-3D Sentry aircraft. As an RAF navigator of some 20 years, I have flown in many aircraft older than me; the E-3D is not one of them! While the age of some of the RAF's fleets has caused some question over recent years, your assessment that the E-3D's altimeter is old because it reads in inches of mercury is wrong. Altimeters can use subscales of millibars and or inches of mercury. Indeed, many new altimeters have both. This is because, while Europe and much of the world sets its altimeters in millibars (or more correctly hectopascals), the good ol' US of A uses inches of mercury. Aircrews worldwide must know how to convert between the two if given an altimeter setting in the other form. As a point of accuracy, millibars are normally given as whole numbers whereas inches of mercury are given to two decimal places, thus making them approximately three times more accurate. Hardly something to moan about!

Yours in pedantry,
IAN THOMPSON, Sqn Ldr, 55 (R) Sqn,

RAF Cranwell.

● Square Basher writes: The airframe has not changed since the 1990s. Because there are so few E-3D airframes available, borrowing parts is a problem. Of course crews can convert from inches to millibars (which are more current in Nato countries) but there have been incidents caused by confusion in the past.

Letter from **Islamabad**
from Our Own Correspondent

OUR Generalissimo has finally handed over his baton and moved sideways to become a civilian leader. But after eight years as army chief and president, Gen Pervez Musharraf leaves a legacy of anarchy and disorder in which jihadists are now seriously challenging the supremacy of Pakistan's military.

The poisoned army chalice passes to Gen Ashfaq Kiyani, former head of the Inter Services Intelligence Directorate, a close US ally and (for now) Musharraf loyalist. This chain smoker faces the apocalyptic possibility of jihadists seizing control of our nuclear weapons, a worst-case scenario that has finally dawned on the west.

The US and President Musharraf feebly assure the world that our nuclear weapons are safe. But it is our 600,000-strong army that deserves scrutiny in the escalating chaos that threatens to grow worse ahead of the January elections.

Like our politics, judiciary and civil society, cracks are beginning to emerge in the once omnipotent military that has directly or indirectly ruled us for 60 years since independence. Our brave boys are engaging the jihadis from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) that border Afghanistan across vast swathes of territory almost to the capital Islamabad itself. But we are losing. In these regions, armed and organized jihadis already enforce a strict Islamic code opposed to all forms of modernity. The Islamists operate parallel administrations dispensing summary justice, regulating traffic, closing down schools for girls and forcing them to wear burqas.

A recent government briefing to convince the world of the efficacy of the army's anti-insurgency drive was counter-productive. It merely drew attention to the army's inability to fight 400 militants in the Swat valley in North West Frontier Province. More than 2,000 soldiers were deployed there in July, but they have yet to engage and there is concern about how easily they have been captured by militants. Within hours of imposing emergency rule on 3 November, General Musharraf had to order the release of 25 militants captured in August in return for 213 soldiers who had been seized by the warlord Baitullah Mehsud.

Many thinking Pakistanis are privately concerned about the impact an unwinnable war will have on the cohesion and professionalism of the army. As the old joke goes, all countries have an army, but Pakistan's army has a country. Unfortunately, growing complacency has fuelled divisions and corruption within it and weakened its capacity. Many officers are attracted by power and appointments. More than 1,200 serving and retired Pakistani military officers – mostly from the army – run a web of banks, transport, road building communication and construction businesses worth billions of dollars.

The result? Since 2005 more than 1,000 soldiers have died in firefights with militants or in ambushes and suicide bombings; another 400, including officers, face disciplinary proceedings for refusing to engage their Muslim brethren; while some 500 others surrendered to Taliban and other jihadist groups without a fight. Morale is low.

The military traditions we inherited from Britain largely survived our three wars with India in 1947-48, 1965 and 1971. But in the 11 years between his military coup and assassination in 1988, General Mohammad Zia-ul Haq effectively created our Islamist problem, joining forces with the mullahs and fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami party in a bid to legitimise his dictatorship. Many of the officers he promoted, now in the upper echelons of the military, have a contempt for their commercially-minded counterparts. Instead they have a vision of an Islamic Caliphate, centred on Pakistan and including Kashmir, Afghanistan and parts of the Central Asian republics.

The real battle we face, then, is what kind of army emerges from the present crisis. In a country with nuclear weapons, the results could be everyone's problem.

FUNNY OLD WORLD

COMPILED BY **VICTOR LEWIS-SMITH**

"When Rotina Mavhunga told us she could conjure refined diesel from a sacred rock with her magic stick, she seemed to possess the answer to our years of chronic fuel shortages," a government lawyer told the High Court in Harare. "And her demonstration before cabinet ministers and distinguished academics was so impressive that officials were convinced she was a genuine n'anga (spirit medium), who was offering a major new source of fuel for Zimbabwe. Consequently, the government plied her with Z$5 billion in cash, as well as food, a farm, a car, some shoes, and other services, so she could use her magical powers to develop the trickle of diesel into a flood.

"However, as the months went by, and the diesel remained just a trickle, we grew suspicious and began to investigate more closely. That's when we discovered that Mavhunga had buried a hosepipe in among the rocks, leading from an abandoned diesel container high in the Muningwa Hills down to her sacred rock in the foothills. Apparently, her mystical incantations and stick waving were not magic at all, they were just signals to an accomplice up in the hills to turn on the container's tap, whenever a demonstration was required. Further enquiries revealed that she had been regularly buying diesel from passing truckers, to replenish her store. As a result, Mavhunga is regarded as disgusting, and has now been charged with fraud and with being a criminal nuisance, and will be put on trial as soon as we can find her. And Registrar-General Tobaiwa Mu-dede faces charges of obstruction of justice for harbouring her." *(Financial Gazette [Harare], 25/10/07. Spotter: Euan Nisbet)*

– o –

"To all my dear 'friends',

"Some of you I have known since early school days, others I have only forged a relationship with in the last few years. Until my 'funeral', I considered all of you close friends. So it was with shock and, I admit, sadness and anger that I realised not one of you managed to find the time to come and say goodbye to me when you heard I was to be buried. I would have understood if just some of you came, bearing flowers or words of apology from others who could not make it. But no. Not a single one of you turned up to pay your last respects. Only my mother.

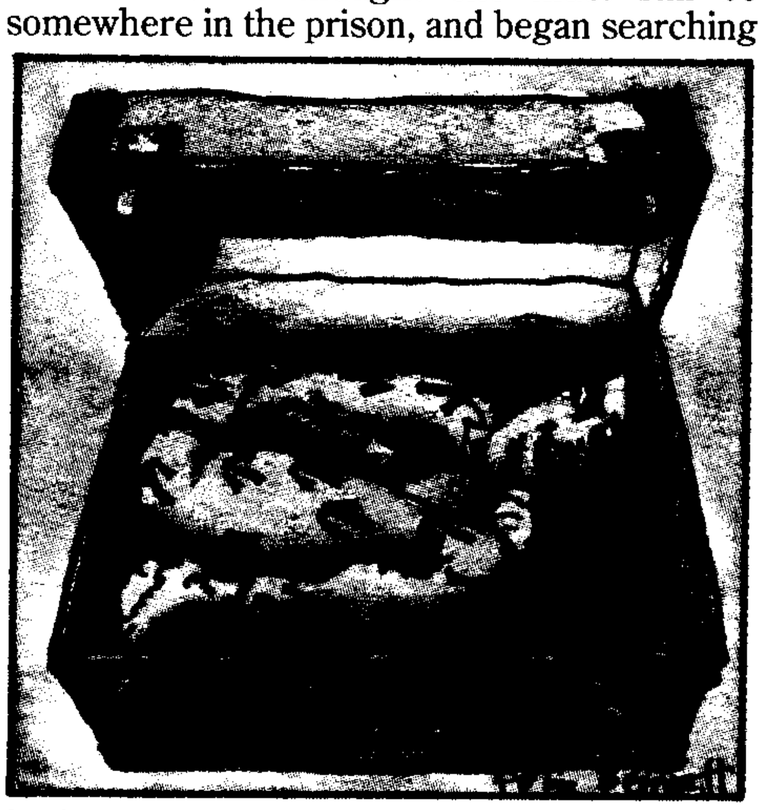
"I lived for our friendships. They meant as much to me as life itself. But how easy it was for you all to forget the pledges of undying friendship I had heard on so many occasions. How different our ideas of friendship seem to be.

"I paid a lot of money to get a fake death certificate, and to bribe undertakers to deliver an empty coffin. I thought my funeral would be a good joke – the kind of prank we have all played on one another over the years. Now I have just one last message for you: my 'funeral' might have been staged, but you may as well consider me dead, because I will not be seeing any of you ever again. You are sick. Amir Vehabovic, Gradiska, Bosnia." (Expressen [Sweden], 20/3/07. Spotter: Peter Owen)

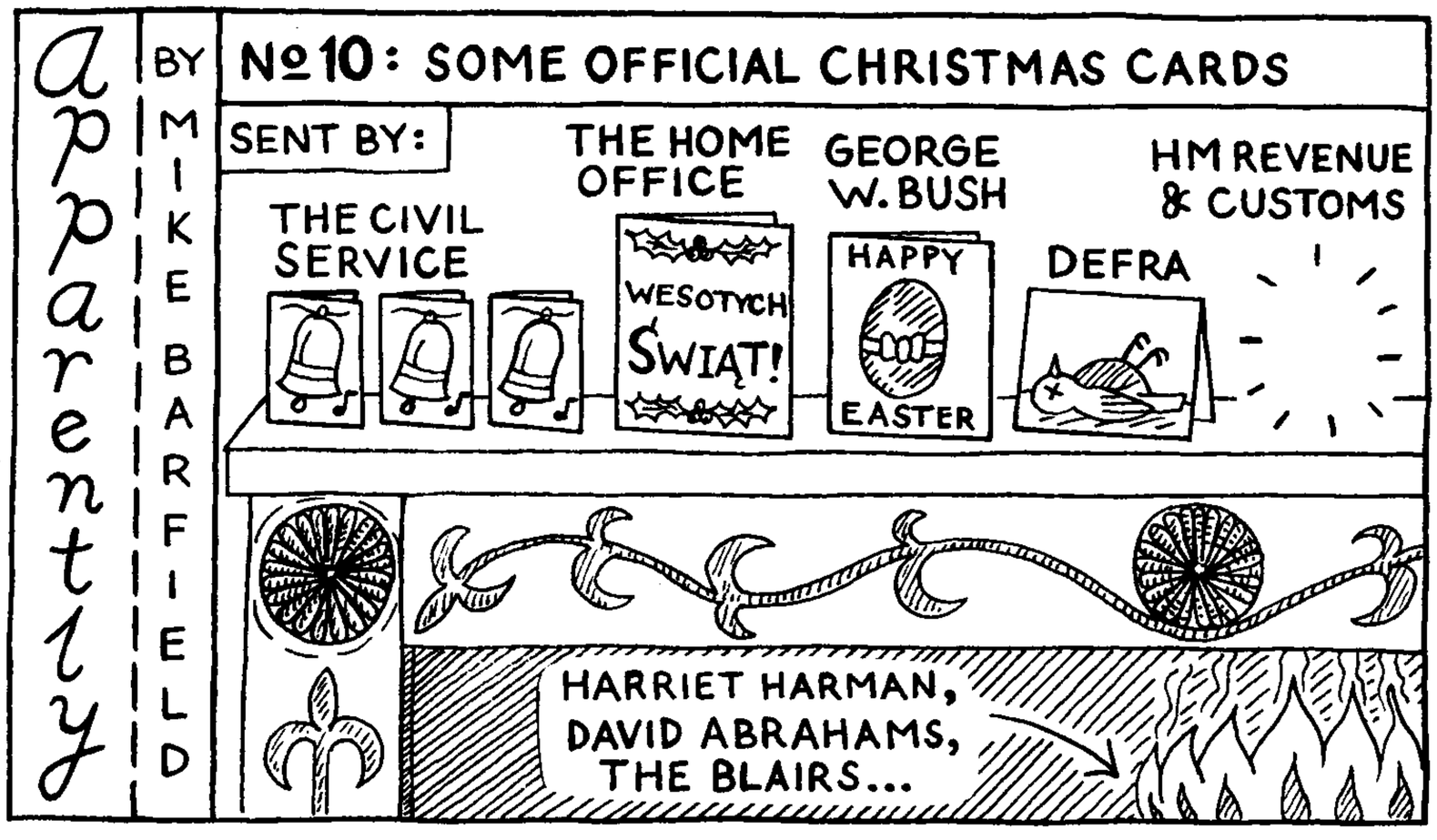
– o –

"When Steffi Krause boasted that she was going to escape from the jail, we laughed at her," a warden admitted to reporters in Neustadt am Ruebenberge, "because we have a reputation as the most secure prison in Hanover. But when we went to check her cell yesterday evening, she was gone.

"At first we thought she must still be somewhere in the prison, and began searching



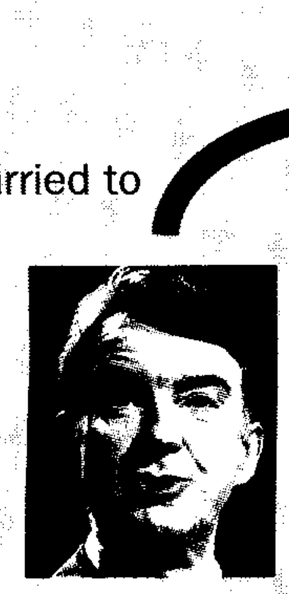
for her. But she wasn't here, and gradually we realised what must have happened. A fellow inmate called Karin Schafer was due for release yesterday, and the suitcase she left with was unusually heavy – so heavy that a warden had to help her lift it onto the bus. Steffi Krause is quite small, and it's obvious now that she must have been hiding inside the suitcase. Police are still looking for both teenagers, and we have ordered a thorough re-evaluation of our security procedures." *(Daily Times [Pakistan], 30/10/07. Spotter: Anon)*



THE GREAT DONATIONS SCANDAL

The Eye's at-a-glance guide to who gave what to who

by Phil Coffers



Peter Mandelson, long term enemy of Gordon Brown

married to

Baroness Jay, supported Hilary Benn in Deputy Leadership contest

£1 million

Hillary Clinton, close friend of Tony Blair and frequent visitor to Downing Street

rejected by

Hilary Bean (TV's Mr Benn), comic Labour minister, son of Bill and Benn, famous Labour flowerpots

supported

Peter Who, teenage General Secretary of the Labour Party, forced to resign

never met

Janet Kidd, Tory-voting secretary of David Abrahams

£500,000

Harriet Harman, Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, who Abrahams claimed was married to him in 1983

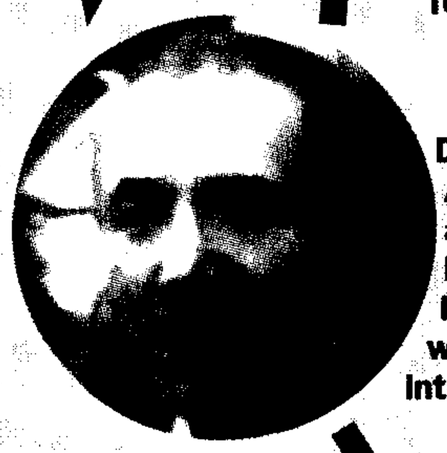
never met

Jack Dromey, Labour Treasurer, claimed to be married to Blair fundraiser Baroness Jay

associate of

Harold Abrahams, runner who accepted gold medal in 1924 Olympics

never heard of



David Abrahams, at the heart of Labour's web of intrigue

£50,000

Bob the Builder, influential North Eastern Labour councillor

£350,000

related to

Jon Mendelsohn, chief Labour fundraiser and former lobbyist

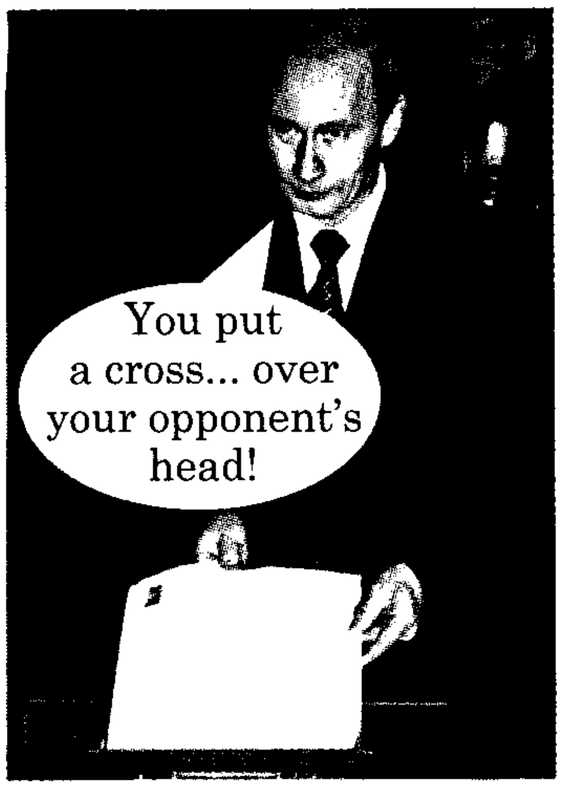
associated with

Felix Mendelssohn, 19th century composer famous for wedding march

Labour

(That's enough Web of Intrigue, Ed.)

DEMOCRACY RUSSIAN STYLE



Those Russian Elections In Full

Vladivodka North: Leonid Smersh (Putin For Czar Alliance) 738,462; Boris Bumpdoff [Deceased] (Democratic Freedom Party) 3. *(No change)*

Abramovich South: Sergei Oligarchski (Suicide Party) 2; Polonoim Arslikov (United Putin For Ever Or Else Party) 3,748,798. *(Swing to Putin)*

Putingrad (formerly St Petersburg): Alexander Lunatikov (Gulag Party) -10°C; Vladimir Putin 600,000,000 *(Putin Gain)*

(That's enough results. Ed.)

"This infatuation with the Mitford sisters has got to stop"

PRIME MINISTERIAL DECREE NO.10

From the Desk of the Supreme Leader

Comrades,

Do not be misled by the propaganda of our enemies. The Liberalist-Cableites, the Cameronian-Bullingdonist clique and their army of slavish lackeys in the media have all attempted to destabilise the Age of Change with their orchestrated campaign of disinformation and malicious mendacities.

Unlike the discredited former leader, *I* am the first to admit that serious errors have been made. Unlike Comrade Blair, who invariably claimed to be innocent, I have no hesitation in admitting that other people are guilty.

One senior Party official, Comrade Watt, has already been purged and has signed the following public confession.

"I, Comrade Watt, being the General Secretary of the British Soviet Socialist Party, freely admit that I have betrayed the Party, Supreme Leader and the principles of the Era of Openness by allowing grave irregularities to occur in the acceptance of donations to the Party given by unscrupulous capitalists seeking corrupt favours under false pretences. I hereby beg forgiveness for my unpardonable lapse into anarcho-Blairite Cash-for-Honoursism which I, to my eternal shame, replaced with neo-Poulsonite Cash-for-Planning-Permissionism.

Yours,
Peter Watt,
The Old Gulag, Siberia Road.

This confession, which was freely volunteered after a mere 48-hours of intensive interrogation, proves beyond doubt that I knew nothing of these underhand crypto-Mandelsonian manoeuvrings and was therefore in no way to blame.

The same cannot be said for many other comrades who have shown insufficient vigilance against the menace of infiltrationist backhanderism.

I am not at this stage prepared to "make lists" of all those who in recent days have followed the Wattite path in falling away from the highest principles of the Age of Trust, and there may well be time for rigorous self-criticism by these comrades before they too have to be purged.

High on the list is Comrade Harriet Harman, elected by foolish members of the Party, led astray by her crypto-feminist agenda, financed as it now turns out by a claque of pseudo-Zionist plutocrats.

Unperson Of The Week

Comrade Harman

Next on the list is Comrade Dromey, husband of the now discredited Harman, posing as a workers' representative from the Amalgamated Union of Tractor Drivers, Boilermakers and Hedgefund Managers, yet, in reality, an unreformed throwback to the worst days of Blairite-Hindujaist-Ecclestonian-Mittalism.

I gather that under interrogation by the media, Comrade Dromey has pitifully pleaded that as Party Treasurer he was the last person who could have been expected to know who was giving money to the Party, or indeed his wife.

Comrades, what could be more sickening or shameful than that anyone right at the top should plead that he knew nothing of what was happening right underneath his nose?

Signed by The Supreme Leader,

Gordon Brown

Comrade Bean

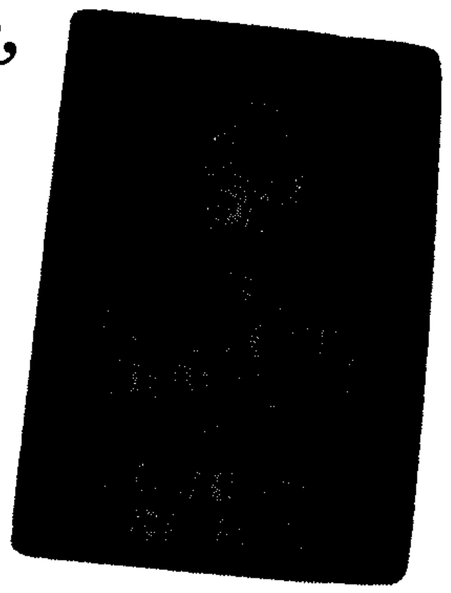
A Statement From Comrade Balls, Commissar for Children, Toddler Groups, Information Skills and Lifelong School Dinners

Comrade Parents,

You are reminded of your duty to educate the workers of tomorrow, ie your children. This will require the elimination of frivolous, bourgeois, infantalist Game-Boyite-Play-Stationism. There is no substitute for reading. All children in our nation's schools should be fully equipped and forcibly encouraged to read one book above all others – *The Thoughts of Comrade Brown ("The Little Brown Book")*.

I recommend in particular Chapter 197, *"The Errors of Blairite-Blunkettist-Deviationism, With Particular Regard To The Inevitable Increase In Illiteracy Threatening National Productivity"*. **E. Balls**

"In the Age of Change, ignorance is the best form of knowledge"



Taken from the Little Brown Book, The Collected Thoughts of Comrade Brown, from the chapter entitled "Financing The Proletarian Revolution"

The Green Five-Year Plan

In pursuit of the ecological targets laid down by the Party with regard to saving the planet, the Supreme Leader has decreed that the following measures should be implemented without delay.

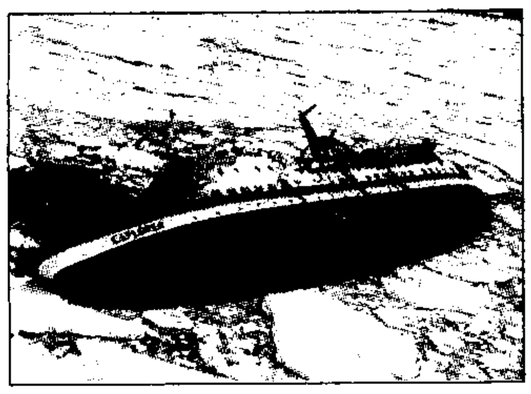
1. A carbon-free nuclear power station shall be built in every town by 2010.
2. Every airport must increase its runway capacity by 600 percent to allow the workers to enjoy carbon-neutral holidays in the Third World (Majorca, Greece, the Maldives, etc).
3. The Green Belt to be renamed the Brown Belt, to provide 2 million much-needed homes for key Polish workers.

By order,

Gordon Green

IT WAS JUST LIKE THE TITANIC

by **Phil Space**



PASSENGERS rescued from the stricken *MS Explorer,* which hit an iceberg off Antarctica, have graphically described how the incident was eerily reminiscent of the *Titanic* disaster... ummm... apart from the fact that there were plenty of lifeboats... and there were no scenes of panic onboard... and the rescue boats were quick to arrive on the scene... and that they weren't left to die in the perilously cold seas... er... but apart from that, have I mentioned how similar it was to the *Titanic*... er... well, they were both ships... and they both struck an iceberg... er... wasn't that bit in the film where Kate Winslet had her arms outstretched good? I loved that song. How did it go again? Ummm... *(cont. for 5000 words)*

HM Revenue & Customs

MS SHAZNEE SUNBLEST
FLAT 217B
BOBBY MOORE ESTATE
NEASDEN
NBG 8FO

Child Benefit no. 762462862
National Insurance no. FO 2718768
Bank Account no. 286424
Pin number 1237
Credit card security code 247
Internet password DANCONA
House Alarm Code 241
Mobile phone PIN 862
Mother's maiden name Prunehat
Favourite school subject Food technology

I am writing to apologise personally for the fact that your personal details (see above) may have been disclosed to a third party (or, indeed, a fourth, fifth, sixth and many other parties).

That is why I am sending out this letter to all eight million people whose details were lost in the post.

It is very important that these details are kept secret, which is why I have listed them above to make sure that you realise how important it is to keep them secret.

You can rest assured that all those involved in typing out and sending this letter have been instructed that in no way must they divulge your details to their boyfriend or anyone they meet in the pub after work on Fridays, who might take advantage of this information to steal your identity and defraud you of your hard-earned savings.

If you do not receive this letter, it may well have been stolen in the post and you should immediately alert all the relevant authorities (see above).

Dave Hartnett
Acting Idiot
HMRC

EXCLUSIVE TO ALL PAPERS

MADDIE 'DNA BREAKTHROUGH'

IT WAS revealed today that DNA examinations of the British tabloids have sensationally revealed that their reports haven't contained a single trace of any facts about the Madeleine McCann case.

"This bombshell will almost certainly lead us to conduct wild, unfounded speculation about the wild, unfounded speculation we've indulged in," said one shifty newspaper editor hurrying from the scene in an obviously shifty way.

Great Moments In Comedy

"The Importance of Being Useless" ***(Her Majesty's Theatre of Revenue & Customs)***

Dave Snooty AND HIS PALS

YOU'RE DOING BRILLIANTLY, DAVE, YOU'RE THRASHING GORDON AND EVERYONE LOVES YOU!
TAKE THAT, YOU OIK!!
YAROOO!
JUST DON'T BLOW IT!
DELIGHTED TO MEET YOU, GEORGE OLD BEAN-YOU'RE MY NEW BEST FRIEND!
HOWDY - WHOEVER Y'ARE
OH NO - DAVE'S A POSHOVER

The Most Controversial Royal Documentary Ever Made

MAJESTY

(as seen on the BBC)

(Pic of Royal Standard rising over Buckingham Palace. Elgar-style music swells in background)

Voice Over: Never before has Her Majesty allowed such intimate access to a film crew. But now the Royal Family, like many other institutions, must adjust its traditional reticence to the demands of the 21st century media.

(Shot of table being laid for 194 people. Close-up of man wiping knife with napkin. Caption: 'Edward Claridge – Senior Knife-Cleaner at Buckingham Palace since 1949)

Claridge: 194 people is about average for when Her Majesty entertains. Tonight we've got the President of Burundi, who is an African gentleman.

(Cut to man in kitchen shelling prawn. Caption: 'Clarence Edwards – Keeper of the Prawn Cocktail since 1921')

Edwards: 194 may sound like a lot of prawn cocktails, but when you've been in the service of Her Majesty for as long as I have you get used to it.

(Shot of guests arriving at reception before dinner)

Voice Over: It's the big moment...

(Close-up of the Queen with crown and full regalia walking into room – not OUT *of room: note BBC controller)*

Queen: Have you come far?

President of Burundi: From Burundi, Ma'am.

Queen: And what do you do?

President of Burundi: I'm the President.

Queen: How very interesting.

(Cut to President of Burundi five minutes later)

Voice Over: What was it like meeting the Queen?

President: She's a wonderful person. Very natural and really interested in what you have to say. She put me at my ease immediately by asking me whether I had come far and then she enquired what I did for a living.

(Cut to shot of large armour-plated car drawing up outside Buckingham Palace)

Voice Over: But it's not all prawn cocktails for Her Majesty. Every week the Queen receives in audience the Prime Minister of the day. She has known 27 in her reign, going back to the Duke of Wellington.

(Shot of man in suit looking shifty)

Tony Blair *(for it is he)*: May I ask you if you are looking forward to your State visit to America, Ma'am?

Queen: And what do you do?

Blair: Ha ha ha ha, Ma'am. I understand it's quite a while since you were last there?

Queen: Oh yes. I met the President, Abraham Lincoln, who was absolutely charming.

Blair: How very interesting, Ma'am.

(There is an awkward pause)

Queen: Have you come far?

(Cut to New Dworkin, State Capital of Virginia. We see an elderly man hoovering a lawn outside the 18th century courthouse. Caption: 'Horace Clambake, Chief Lawn Supervisor, Public Works Department, State of Virginia')

Clambake: The Queen of England coming to New Dworkin. That's something special for us folks. It's history in the making.

Voice Over: They are even installing a new toilet at the New Dworkin Holiday Inn, where Her Majesty is staying.

(Cut to man wearing baseball hat and overalls putting up marble towel rail in toilet. Caption: 'Zebedee Greenberg, Manager, Holiday Inn, New Dworkin')

Zebedee Greenberg: The Queen of England coming to New Dworkin. That's something special for us folks. It's history in the making.

Voice Over: But the big worry turned out not to be the toilet, but the weather.

(Music plays 'Singing In The Rain'. Shot of grey clouds over courthouse)

Voice Over: Would it rain on New Dworkin's big day? Next week we find out...

(More Elgar-style music plays over credits)

© Really Dull Films for the BBC 2007

IT'S ANITHER DAY O' THE BROON-ITES GETTING THEIR ARSES HANDED TO THEM OAN A STICK...
THE BROON-ITES
THE NUMPTIES NECK-DEEP IN NORTH-EAST NAUGHTINESS!
Fountain and Jamieson
CRIVVENS AN' JINGS GORDON! IT'S ONE THING AFTER ANITHER!
RIP! TEAR!
RIP!
BYE CRUEL WORLD
HAUD YER WHEESHT BROON-BALLS!
JOCKSHIRE POST LATEST: BROON-ITES USELESS SCUNNERS
HENRY DAVIES
BUT PA BROON, NORTHERN ROCK'S UP THA' FIZZER, EVERYONE'S BANK DETAILS HA' BEEN FLUSHED DOON THE BOG AND NOO WE'RE GI'EN A DOSE O' LALDY OVER THA' DODGY LOANS...
...NAE ONE'S GANNAE GI' MONEY TAE US FER OOR ELECTION PIGGY BANKS AFTER THIS WEEK!
DINNAE FASH YERSEL'! AH' KNOW OF A PLACE WHERE WE CAN GET OOR HANDS ON LOADS OF BAWBIES!!
BUT HOW? EVERYONE'S FINALLY WORKED OUT YE'RE AN ACCIDENT-PRONE BAMPOT THAT COULDNAE ORGANISE A PISS-UP IN YER OAN THROAT!
EXACTLY!
PUFF
PUFF
CHEQUE FROM F.A.
pay G. Broon
SIX MILLION POONDS
PLEASURE DAEING BUSINESS WITH YE!
JINGS, CRIVVENS AND HELP MA BOBBY CHARLTON!
PRESS
BBC BREAKING NEWS...
NAGER... GORDON BROON APPOINTED NEW ENGLAND MANAGER... GORDON BROON APPOINTED NEW ENGLAND M

BEAR STORM GROWS

by Our Religious Correspondent **Rupert Bear-Murdoch**

MILLIONS of angry commuters took to the streets of London yesterday in protest at the naming of a teddy bear after their revered railway terminus.

"How dare they call a bear Paddington," protested one extremist railway traveller, "it is sacrilege."

Fur Trials Abroad

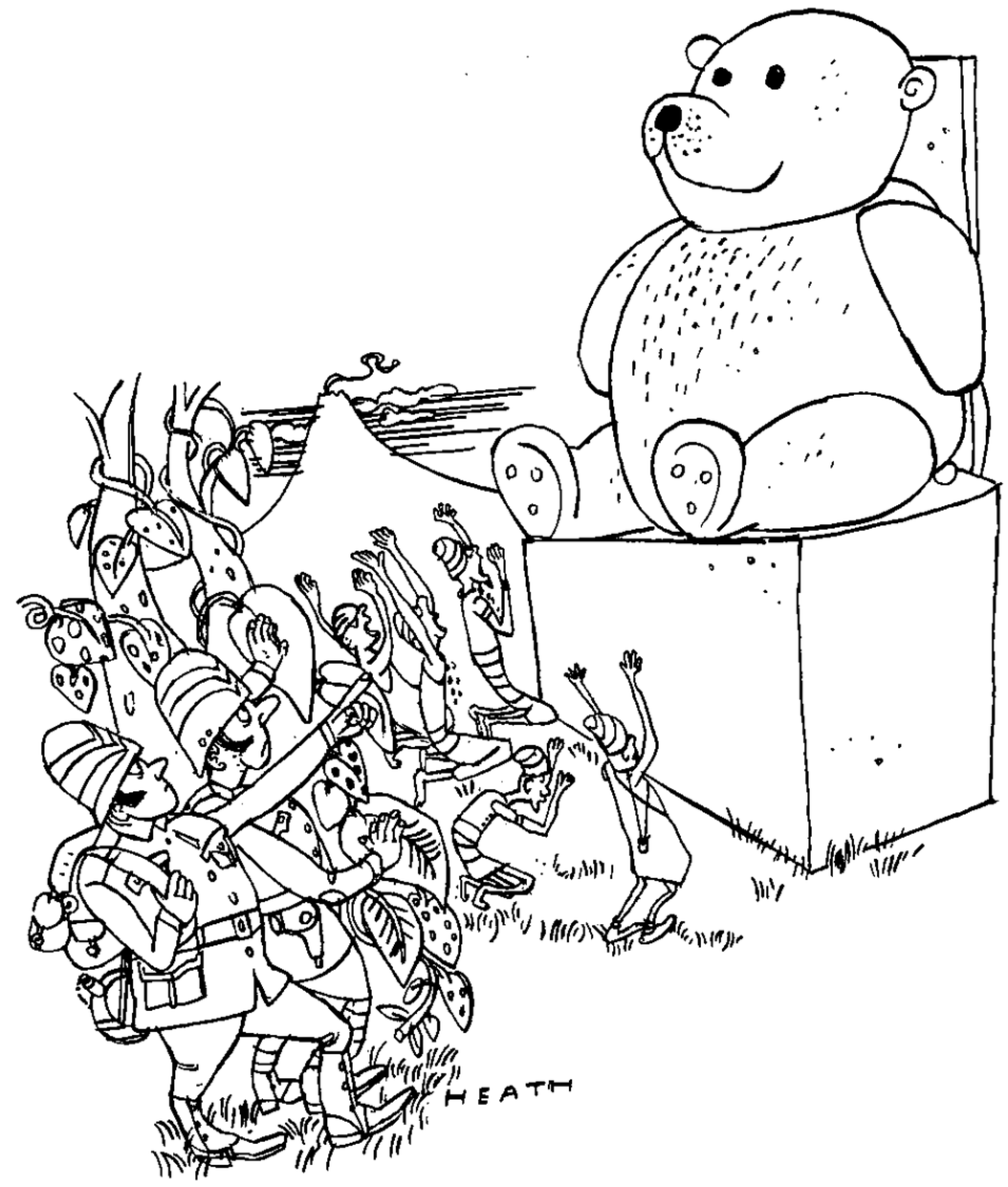
Chanting First Great Western passengers beseiged bookshops throughout Britain, waving placards calling for children's book author Michael Bond to be given forty lashes or preferably to be hung from a crane.

Appearing on *Newsnight*, the Peruvian ambassador said, "there is no way I can intervene to save Mr Bond from his deserved punishment. You have to understand that the British have a very different culture from us, and hold their railway system in very high regard."

STOP PRESS

There was more outrage from religious groups yesterday as Hindus protested against the controversial naming of 'Yogi' bear.

"It's obvious that someone at Hanna Barbera has made a huge Boo-Boo," said one beardy *(cont. p94.)*



KNACKER TO INVESTIGATE 'DODGY DONORS'

by Our Crime Staff
Gordon Brown-Envelope

CHIEF INSPECTOR Knacker was last night called in again to investigate claims that the government have been acting illegally.

Said Inspector Knacker, "We are confident that we can make a speedy investigation into this matter which will last only two years. After that it will be up to the Criminal Prosecution Service to decide that no further action should be taken and that everyone involved is innocent."

He then promised, "Rest assured I shall do everything in my power to keep my job."

LATE NEWS

- Brazilian electrician shot on suspicion of "donating money to Labour Party" p94.

That Labour Fundraiser Letter To David Abrahams In Full

new Labour
for Britain

Dear David
Thanks for your letter which Oliver passed to me. The party is, of course, very appreciative of all the help and support you have given us over many years.
So... please, please, please gie us some more cash, pretty please... pretty please with sugar on... we don't care if it comes in your name or the name of Mickey Mouse, Hugh Jarse or Adolf Hitler, all we want is your money and bundles and bundles of it.
Once again, I would like to say how much we value and respect your money.

Jon Mendelsohn
Director of General Election Resources

That Explanation By Jon Mendelsohn In Full

As you can see from the tone of the letter, I was clearly trying in the subtlest possible manner to distance the party from Mr Abrahams by begging him for more cash. This is a well-established practice in fund-raising circles for severing, many months later, all contact with someone with whom in hindsight you should have had no dealings.

POETRY CORNER

In Memoriam
Evel Knievel, Stunt Man Extraordinary

So. Farewell
Then Evel
Knievel.

Famous for
Leaping over
13 double-decker
Buses on
Your motorbike.

Now you have
Made the
Great leap into
The unknown.

Evel J. Thribb (17½ Buses)

TV Highlights

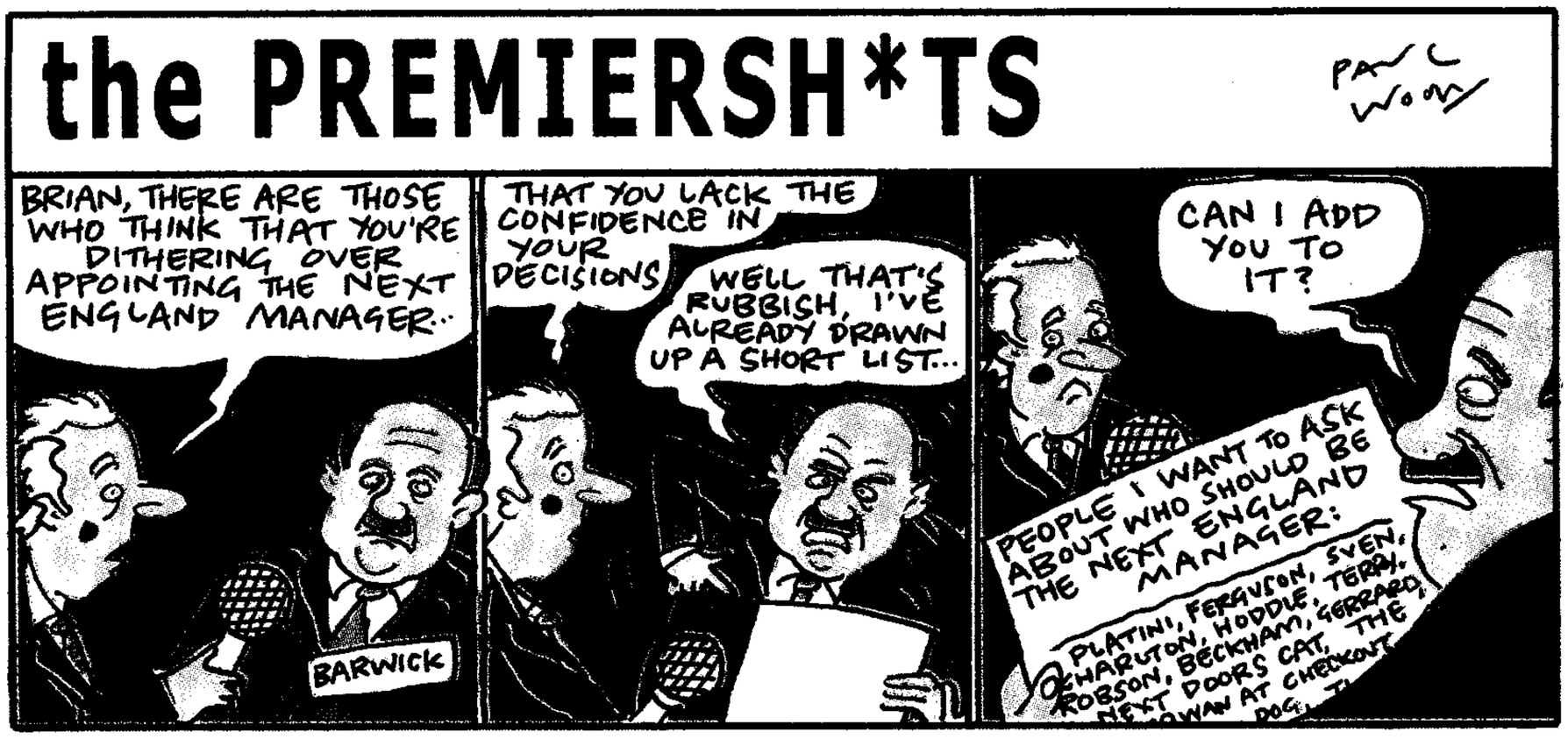
The Secret Millionaire

Channel 4 Wednesday 9pm

This week, millionaire property developer David Abrahams somehow manages to secretly work his way into the very heart of the Labour Party organisation without anyone remembering having ever met him, talked to him or seen him – so that he can give it £600,000.

Eye rating:
Surprisingly sleazy to watch

the PREMIERSH*TS


PAUL WOOLLEY
BRIAN, THERE ARE THOSE WHO THINK THAT YOU'RE DITHERING OVER APPOINTING THE NEXT ENGLAND MANAGER..
BARWICK
THAT YOU LACK THE CONFIDENCE IN YOUR DECISIONS
WELL THAT'S RUBBISH, I'VE ALREADY DRAWN UP A SHORT LIST...
CAN I ADD YOU TO IT?
PEOPLE I WANT TO ASK ABOUT WHO SHOULD BE THE NEXT ENGLAND MANAGER:
PLATINI, FERGUSON, SVEN, SHARUTON, HODDLE, TERRY, ROBSON, BECKHAM, GERRARD, NEXT DOORS CAT, THE

Great British Heroes

No. 94

Gordon Brown of Khartoum

HE STOOD courageously at the top of the steps. Below him the angry mob demanded the head of teddy bear teacher, Mrs Daphne Frobisher. Defiantly Gordon stared into the maddened eyes of the crazed Sudanese rabble.

"Look," he said firmly, gathering all his British sang-froid, "I appreciate that we have our cultural differences and I hope that we can solve this amicably through the normal channels."

If you would like to buy a copy of this print, send £250,000 anonymously to the Labour Party at once.

OXFORD UNION

Forthcoming Debates

"This House believes in the freedom of the President of the Union to get a lot of publicity by inviting ridiculous and unpleasant people as speakers"

SPEAKERS

For The Motion

President of the Union: Luke Twytte

Treasurer of the Union: Lucy Twytte *(no relation)*

Also for the Motion

Mr Osama bin Laden

President Robert Mugabe

The Late Adolf Hitler

Against The Motion

Everyone else

Members are invited to bring their own placards and to indulge in any form of behaviour which will result in photo opportunities for the President, Mr Luke Twytte

---

Daily Mail

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2007

BIG HEADLINES CAUSE HOUSING SLUMP SHOCK

By Our Economics Staff
Charles Mooregage

SENIOR analysts at the Daily Mail today warned that enormous headlines may lead to a collapse in house prices leaving first-time buyers stranded at the bottom rung of the property ladder.

Said one typical couple, Mr and Mrs Made-up-in-the-office,

"We are at our wits end. If headlines keep getting bigger we'll have nowhere to live at Christmas."

Full story and pictures **p3**

BRANSON TO BUY LABOUR PARTY

by Our Economics Correspondent **Richard Northern-Rock-Taylor**

THE millionaire philanthropist and hot-air balloon enthusiast Sir Richard Branson is now the front-runner to rescue the ailing Labour Party.

Speaking from his beard yesterday, Sir Richard told reporters, "Millions of people have invested their hard-earned money in the Labour Party and now it is all going down the pan.

"My consortium has made a realistic offer of 12p for all the assets of the Labour Party – the name, the MPs, the Prime Minister and the associated properties on key sites such as Downing Street.

"I can revitalise this ailing party, which has suffered from poor management for years. I will rebrand it as Virgin Labour, which will offer cheap flights, away-day supersaver train tickets and cut-price votes for everyone."

Late News

The Virgin Labour Party was said to be "running late" due to the wrong sort of beard on the line between Reading and Didcot Parkway.

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH

Letters *to the Editor*

SIR – Whilst I abhor the opinions of Mr Irving Berlin and Mr Sid Griffin, it is nonetheless their perfect right to express their repulsive views in whichever forum they choose. Surely the way to oppose these loathsome individuals is to engage them in rational debate over a glass of sherry in the attempt to persuade them to adopt a more moderate position.
Dr J. Pangloss,
St Ivel College, Cambridge.

SIR – I am a profound believer in the freedom of speech and those who attempted to silence Sir Oswald Mosley and his friend Herr Mussolini at the Oxford Union last week were guilty of gross discourtesy to two very fine Christian gentlemen. Indeed, in a more enlightened age those protestors would all themselves have been silenced by a healthy dose of capital punishment.
Rear-Admiral Sir Barrington Frisbee,
Berchtesgaden-on-Thames.

SIR – Talk about the right to free speech. What about the extreme right to free speech?
Mike Giggler,
Via email.

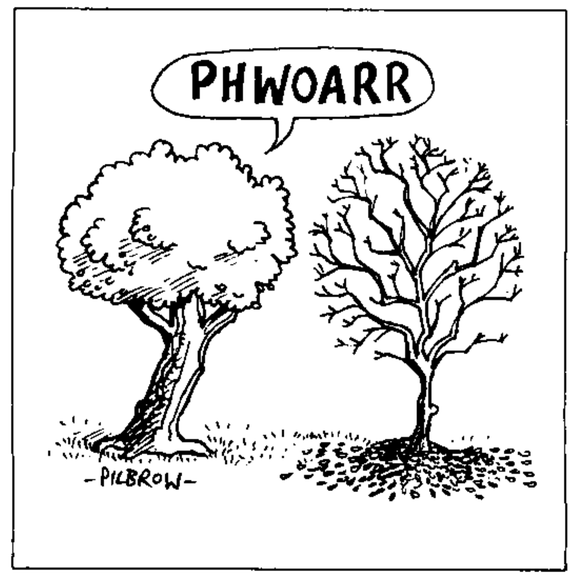
A Taxi Driver writes

Every week a well-known taxi driver is invited to address the Oxford Union on a subject of topical importance. This week **David 'Dave' Irving** (minicab no. 19391945) on the holocaust.

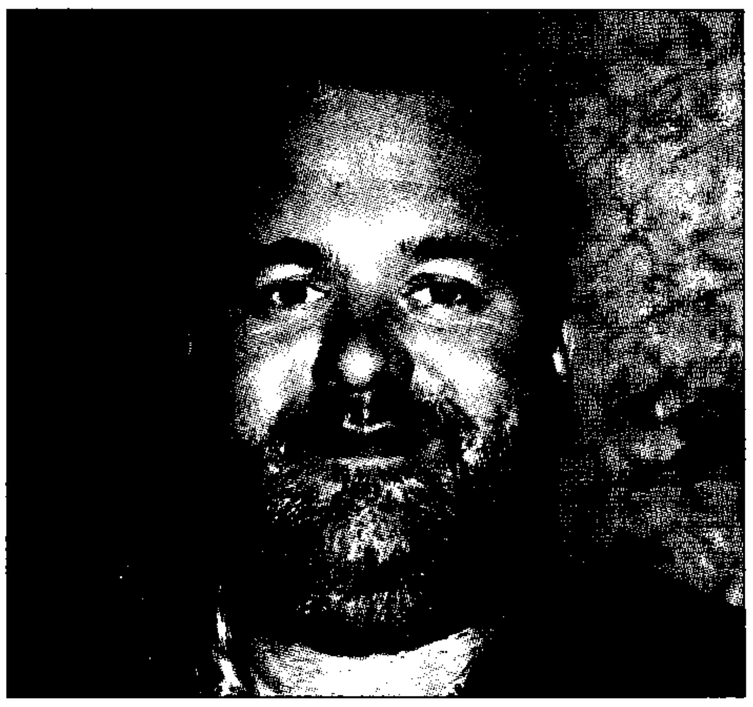
Blimey guv, it's obvious innit? Them Jews made it all up. I've been through all them lists and documents and pictures and stuff – hey, they're all fake. And anyway, if they'd killed all them Jews, there wouldn't be any Jews left, would there? How do you work that one out?

I had that Albert Speers in the back of the cab once. He told me that it never happened and he had nothing to do with it. So who are you going to believe, me and my mate Albert, or all those students with beards and stuff?

You know what I'd do with all them troublemakers? I'd gas them, just like they did to the Jews.



DIARY



CHRIS MOYLES ANSWERS THE BIG QUESTIONS

So Chris, what's it like being famous?

● Normal people, people who aren't celebs but just do normal stuff – normoes, I call them – often come up to me and bother me with shit like, "What's it like being famous?"

That's a big one. What I tell them is the thing about being famous and shit is you're recognised all over the place, even by people who don't actually know you personally and stuff. That's something people who aren't famous don't realise and stuff. Like I can't go into a club wearing my Radio 1 T-shirt with my face on it without people stopping and saying, "Hey, are you that Chris Moyles guy off Radio 1?"

Even when I'm out for a quiet drink with my mates, just sitting quiet talking shite down the local, I only have to start speaking in my normal voice about some of my fellow celebs like Kylie, Sharon, Kate Moss blah blah blah – all big fans of the show and like that stuff – and, you got it, someone from the other side will come over and say, "Are you that Chris Moyles?"

But fame has its pluses. Like you get to rub shoulders – and a whole lot more, if you're lucky, cwoor – with a lot of well fit birds. And that can't be bad, you know and stuff.

Away from the fame and shit are you really just an ordinary decent bloke, Chris?

● Put it this way. Sure, I have mates who are in quotes showbiz close quotes but I also have mates who are just like normal and like sitting in the local catching up on what I'm up to and just talking about me like everybody does. But when you're on TV and radio as much as I am, you're going to be recognised and all that shit, and you've got to deal with it.

You talk about radio and TV, Chris. What's the difference between radio and TV?

● On radio, there's no pictures, there's just sound. On TV, there's both. This is what a lot of people don't realise. This means that when you're talking or generally farting around on radio, people out there can't see you. Sure, the other people round and about the studio can, the producer and stuff, but the listeners can't, because it's radio not TV and, as I was saying, on radio there's no pictures which means people can't see you.

On TV, it's the other way round. Like, well, not the other way round exactly. It's not as if they can see you but not hear you and stuff. No: on TV they can see you AS WELL AS hear you. If we're going to be technical about it, they're not just listeners, they're viewers too. And you have to be aware of this whenever you agree to appear on television – the audience aren't just going to hear you, they're going to be seeing you as well, via the cameras and stuff.

So does that make TV better than radio, Chris?

● Depends what you mean by 'better', really. Radio's better for some things, TV's better for others. No good watching porn on the radio – you wouldn't be able to see anything, durh! – or nothing worth watching, like well-fit sexy birds getting their kit off, f'r instance! But if you're driving home after a hard day's work, then for fuck's sake don't take your eyes off the road to watch TV or you might crash into a wall and kill yourself.

You've had some mega celebs on your Radio 1 show, Chris. Talk us through some of the most memorable moments.

● How much time do we have then? There's been a million billion golden moments, like Liam Gallagher coming on the show, and him pulling his trousers down live on air – fucking outrageous, but you've got to hand it to the bloke, I nearly pissed myself laughing. Then we had the lovely Sharon Osbourne on, and I said, cwoor, I'll give you a tenner for Children in Need if you take off your panties, love, and she did that mad laugh of her and said fuck off Moylesy. Classic!

Or the time I had Professor Stephen Hawking on, and we switched off his voice-box for a giggle and did farty noises instead, cracked us up that one did, and took him down a peg or two, or the time Gerri Halliwell came on and I told her to get her tits out, or when I did the whole show sat with a bucket on my head, or when I did a poo into a teacup live on air, or when the Kaiser Chiefs came on and I asked each one of them to name which one of Girls Aloud they'd most like to shag. Before I came along, British radio used to be full of posh wankers with apples up their arses talking about the balance of fucking payments and stuff, but now it's a lot more like real.

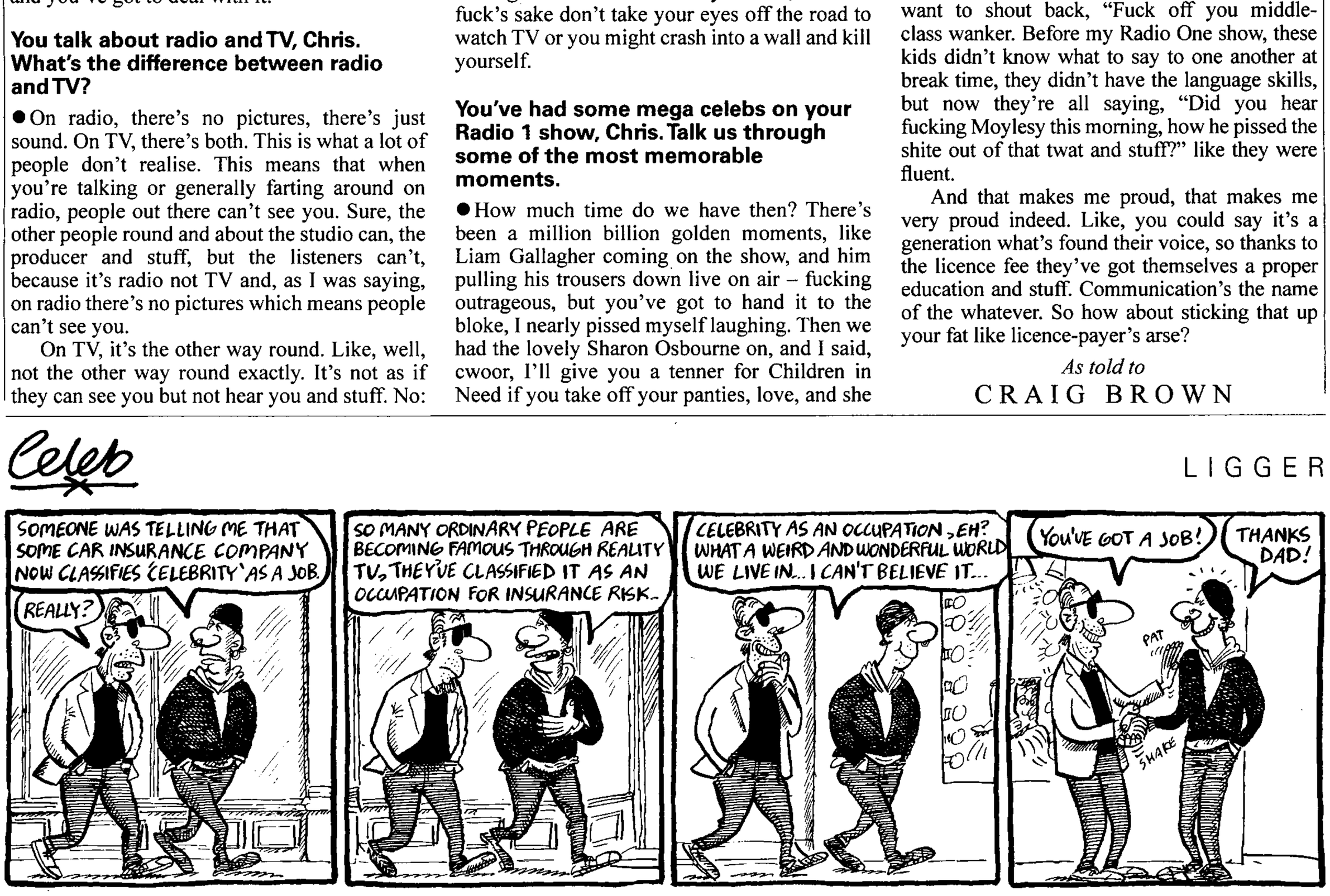
So is the licence fee worth it, would you say, Chris?

● You may think I'm shite, that's up to you, but answer me this: I've got eight and a half million listeners think the sun shines out my arsehole, if you'll pardon my Bulgarian. And I have an educational role, by which I mean I learn kids a helluva lot of shite and that. A lot of them's schoolkids, I've had letters from kids of six and stuff saying "love the show, listen to it every morning Chris, and thanks, Chris, 'cos before I started tuning in I frankly didn't have a clue what a bumcrack was or a twat or a shite or a tongue-kiss or a bum wax or a crotchless thong for that matter, and now I know and I've told all me mates at school and now they think I'm cool like you". It's them that makes it all worthwhile.

So now whenever I hear some tit in a poncey suit and fucking tie on Newsnight with a plum up his arse rabbiting on about the licence fee and what a wicked waste and all that shit, I want to shout back, "Fuck off you middle-class wanker. Before my Radio One show, these kids didn't know what to say to one another at break time, they didn't have the language skills, but now they're all saying, "Did you hear fucking Moylesy this morning, how he pissed the shite out of that twat and stuff?" like they were fluent.

And that makes me proud, that makes me very proud indeed. Like, you could say it's a generation what's found their voice, so thanks to the licence fee they've got themselves a proper education and stuff. Communication's the name of the whatever. So how about sticking that up your fat like licence-payer's arse?

As told to
CRAIG BROWN


SOMEONE WAS TELLING ME THAT SOME CAR INSURANCE COMPANY NOW CLASSIFIES 'CELEBRITY' AS A JOB.
REALLY?
SO MANY ORDINARY PEOPLE ARE BECOMING FAMOUS THROUGH REALITY TV, THEY'VE CLASSIFIED IT AS AN OCCUPATION FOR INSURANCE RISK.
CELEBRITY AS AN OCCUPATION, EH? WHAT A WEIRD AND WONDERFUL WORLD WE LIVE IN... I CAN'T BELIEVE IT...
YOU'VE GOT A JOB!
THANKS DAD!
PAT
SHAKE

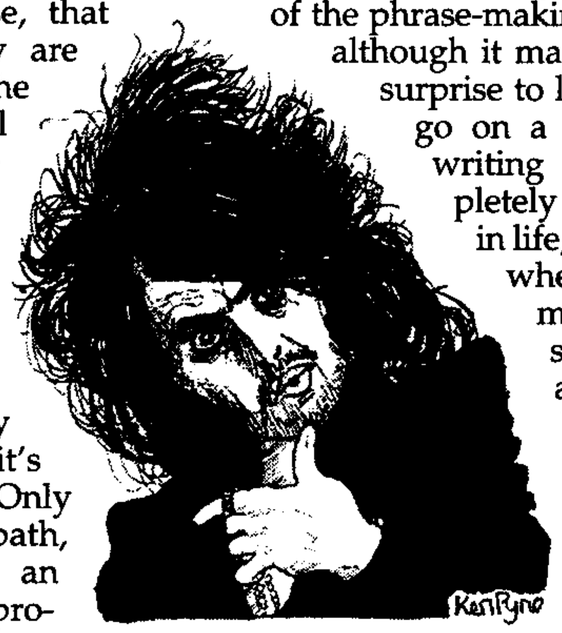
Literary Review

Russell crowing

My Booky Wook
Russell Brand
(Hodder & Stoughton, £18.99)

THIS is the age of the huge, damaged ego. Normal people with normal aspirations are being elbowed out of public life by these monsters of narcissism, with their unspeakable childhoods, unquenchable need for applause and lucrative book deals with Hodder & Stoughton.

Everything moves so quickly these days, of course, that most of the country are only barely aware of the existence of Russell Brand, and yet here he is, rambling away in hardback about his favourite subject: himself. Over the course of 335 dismal, masturbatory pagey-wages, it gradually becomes clear that it's his only subject. Only child, solipsist, sociopath, TV personality: it's an interesting career progression.



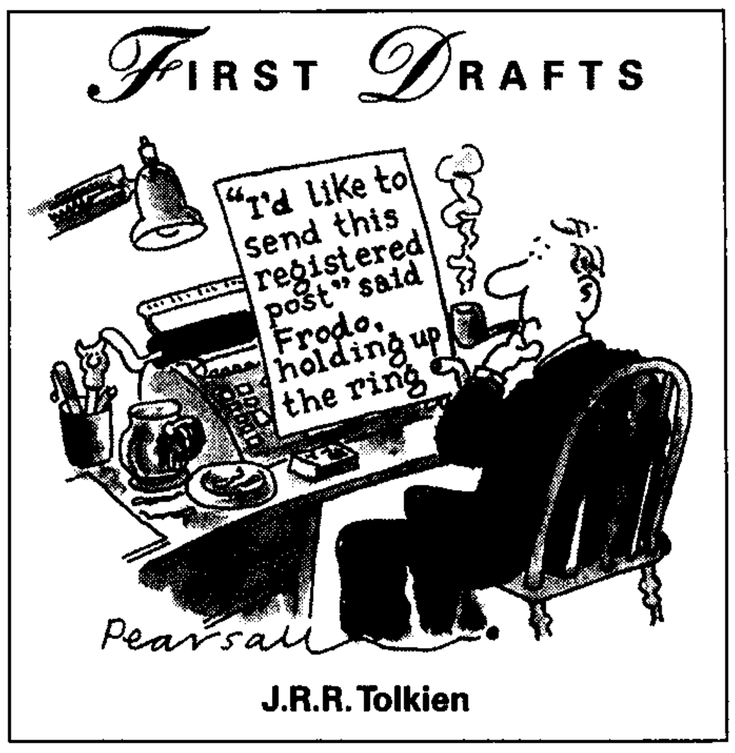
Was he lonely as a child? "I found it very difficult to consort with other children." He'd jump around and hurt himself, do anything to get attention. He ate ants, but only "for the amusement of others". He wasn't "an ant-wanker". As you might expect, self-pleasurement features prominently in this book. Either actually or metaphorically, he always seems to have his hand down his trousers. "An additional source of dangerous nourishment was my dad's reservoir of porn." His father's idea of childcare was to leave him with a pile of girlie magazines while he went to boff his girlfriend upstairs.

Russell desperately sought his father's approval. His father had been a decent footballer in his youth, and Russell was a big girl's blouse who couldn't do sport at all. "I ain't never really had much fun," he bleats at one stage. "I don't like birthdays, or any other time when you're meant to be happy." "This image of myself as compromised and inconsistent made me want to withdraw from the world even further."

We're leaving out the jokes here, for Russell's technique is to intersperse horrific stories of his life played for laughs with raw cries of genuine pain. At least in the early days, he is only being expelled from almost every school or college he attends. Later on the self-destructive streak manifests itself more powerfully in rampant drug addiction and promiscuous sex. Russell revels in it all, needless to say. This isn't so much a life lived as a life performed.

Of course there's an intelligence at work here, a very sharp one. Some of the phrase-making is wonderful, although it may not come as a surprise to learn that he can go on a bit. In fact, his writing is often completely out of control; as in life, he never knows where to stop. This may work on stage, where he is a motormouth, but people can only read at the speed they read, and on the page it can become cruci-fyingly boring. The prose style, also, is a strange thing. On one page he uses a word like "numinous", which shows he has read a book or two. And on the next he writes "I was angry with them flowers". Is he literate or not? Can't he make his mind up?

The flowers incident is the give-away. Russell himself regards it as his "Rosebud!" moment. A nice old man is showing the tiny Russell the flowers he has grown, pops indoors to the loo and says, "Don't stamp on those flowers, will you?" So Russell stamps on the flowers. He doesn't just stamp on them, either, he obliterates them. And waits for the old man to come back and shout at him. Looking back on this, the older Russell sees himself as the victim. He mourns what he lost out of upsetting the old man, the friendship he could have had. He can't empathise with the old man; it never even occurs to him to try. Other people simply don't exist for him. After he has named the girl to whom he has lost his virginity, and spent four pages writing it up as a hilarious anecdote, she says: "Tell no one." He then tells the whole school. Then, 15 years later, he tells everyone who is reading this book. This second level of irony utterly eludes him. The girl presumably now wants him dead, and after reading this book, you might too.



WHAT YOU DIDN'T MISS, Pt 94

Fame and Fortune
Frederic Raphael

ON ELECTION day, 3 May 1979, the internationally acclaimed writer Morris Oxford stood in the hallway of his modestly fashionable Chelsea house calmly embracing his now middle-aged but still indisputably enticing wife. A copy of his new novel, *All About Me, Once Again*, lay on the Louis XVI *escritoire*. There was a slight thump as a package containing the Hollywood film script on which Morris would shortly work his magic fell through the letter-box. His Porsche lay drawn up outside.

"What I can't understand," she breathed softly, "is why, all those years ago back at Cambridge, when you could have had absolutely anyone, you chose me."

"It was your elegance," he said. "It never rained but it Diored."

"Darling, you're cracking me up."

"Cracks? Oh dear, next you'll be telling me I'm flawed."

"The thing about floors is that they have ceilings above them. Something to aspire to."

"If I wanted Excelsior as my motto, I'd have read *Le Morte d'Arthur*."

"So I'm your Lady of the Lake. As in Veronica, I suppose… Darling, this can't go on."

"But sweet-heart, my greenery-yallery lass out of Malory, it has to. This is a Frederic Raphael novel, remember, and the contract calls for another 300 pages of highly stylised banter."

Abruptly the telephone rang. Picking it up as he fondly surveyed the pile of paperback copies of his previous novel, *Jolly Times on the Cam*, he heard the voice of his agent.

"Morris. Your publisher loves you. He's already christened you the Star of David."

"You've never really got over my Jewishness, have you Morty?"

"I can never work out whether you're successfully Jewish or Jewishly successful. There is a difference."

"Then it's like your efforts on my behalf. By which I mean barely noticeable."

"I'm like the waves, Morris. It's the tiny movements that make the biggest stirs… By the way, Universal will pay you a fortune to rewrite that script."

"And you're the cookie with the crumbling centre. Tell them I have to heckle for my shekels. Bye, Morty."

He turned back to his wife. "You know," he said sadly, his arm caressing her alluring bicep. "I sometimes wonder what gives my work its underlying distinctiveness?"

"There's your modesty," she said.

"That, of course."

"And your smart remarks."

"I don't know," he said. "I think there's a fundamental arrogance in the way I constantly underestimate myself."

"And the fact that you never really came to terms with having to leave Cambridge."

"Ever going forward to the Backs? Point taken."

"And the highly-stylised banter, naturally."

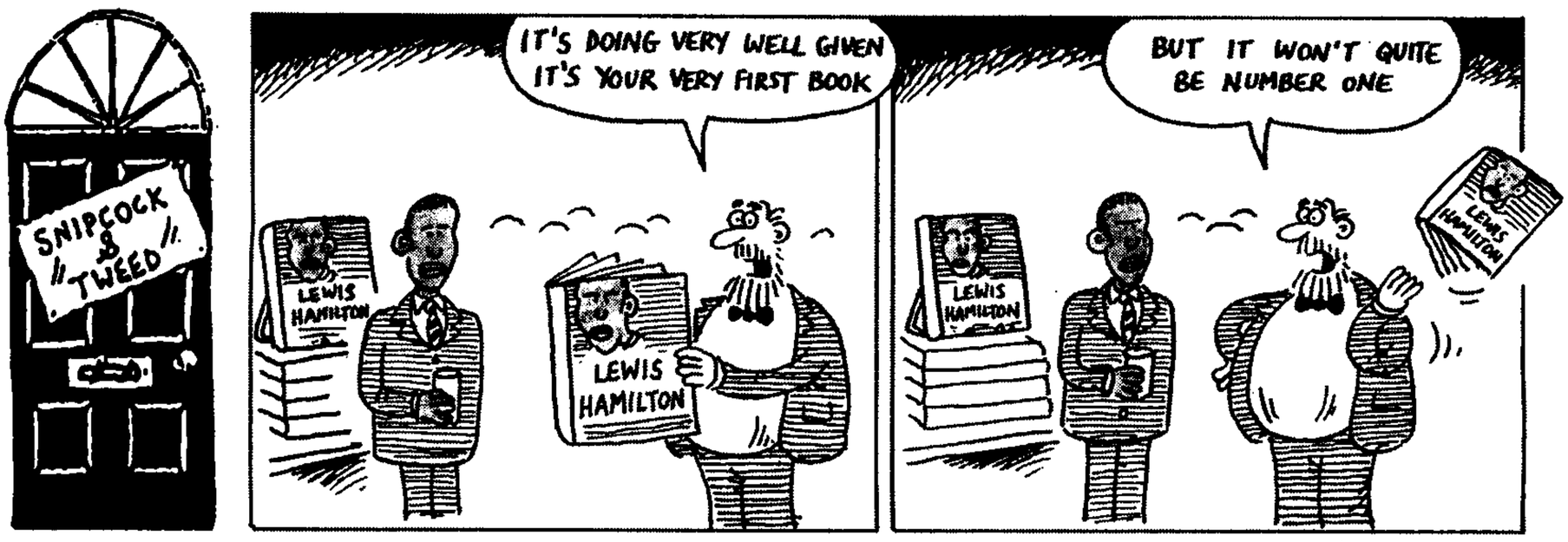
"I think you mean artificially, darling. But keep going, we've got another 200 pages to fill yet. And apparently this one's going on the radio, which makes it even worse…" [*continues*]

LIBRARY NEWS

■ ALMOST 250,000 books have been culled or lost from libraries in the London borough of Waltham Forest in the past two years, the council admitted last week.

A stock take in March found 109,099 fewer items than the library service thought it owned. Apparently not satisfied with the amount of shelf space freed up by that, staff were told to remove books that had not been borrowed in three years – and to send them to the huge recycling plant at Edmonton.

When local paper the *Waltham Forest Guardian* reported a big drop in the official "books per 1,000 people" figures, the council "utterly refuted" that around quarter of a million books had vanished. Now they have confessed that the number of library items is down 239,344 although their claim that the 2005 figures were "enormously inaccurate" means they really have no idea how many books have gone. They also admitted that sending the books for recycling rather than selling them or giving them away "was poor practice".


SNIPCOCK & TWEED
LEWIS HAMILTON
IT'S DOING VERY WELL GIVEN IT'S YOUR VERY FIRST BOOK
LEWIS HAMILTON
BUT IT WON'T QUITE BE NUMBER ONE
LEWIS HAMILTON
LEWIS HAMILTON

Pseuds Corner

...I do have a black, velvet Vionnet in my collection. I also have a Poiret cape and a Fortuny. Pieces by the named houses are more important to me than life. Well, almost.

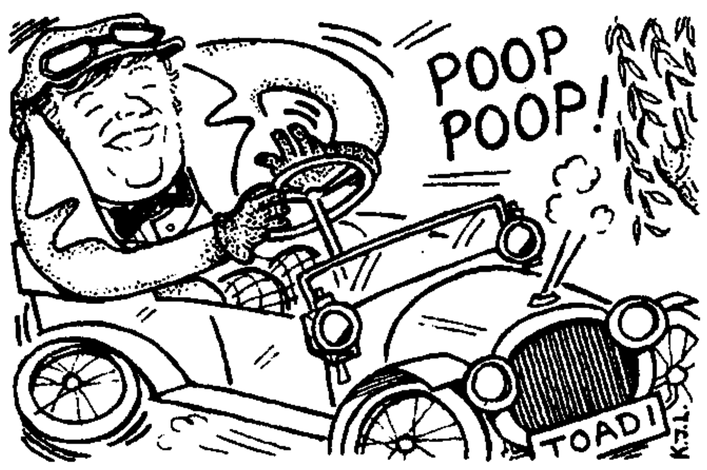
Actress and antique dealer VIRGINIA WETHERELL, interviewed for 'My Style', ***Independent on Sunday***

Daniel Higgs is the singer for the band *Lungfish* and is an absolute modern-day shaman. His presence in person and on stage is absolutely mesmerising. In another time he would have ruled the world, or been burned at the stake, or had his own cult.

Flyer for a performance by Chiara Giovando and Daniel Higgs Duo, Woodwick House Hotel, Orkneys

When the alarm goes off at 7 a.m. I head downstairs and get out the juicer, I throw in three carrots, four florets of broccoli, some cucumber, celery, an apple and a tiny piece of ginger...I also make my own muesli with oats, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, nuts and raisins, and I eat that while I'm reading the FT. Then I'll shower, get ready and jump in my Porsche... [continues]

A Day in the Life of SIMON NIXON, internet entrepreneur, ***Sunday Times Magazine***



In the end the iPhone is like some glorious early-60s sports car. Not as practical, reliable, economical, sensible or roomy as a family saloon but oh, the joy. The jouissance as Roland Barthes liked to say. What it does, it does so supremely well, that what it does not do seems laughably irrelevant.

STEPHEN FRY, ***Guardian***

TALIBAM! The band have a brand of shitstorm skonk grounded in intelligent dynamic group exchange; spastic, impossibly octopoidal drum splatter and impenetrable stuttering free jazz soundscapes burgeon. Above the tangled percussive squall, the synth battles the silence, fast becoming a knock-down drag-out battle to the death.

Preview of forthcoming bands playing at the Shoreditch club, Cargo

In your new series, do you still strip women down to their underwear and make them cry?

We have this pink box, called the pod, that toured around the country with us. It provided a very intimate environment in which women could feel safe and be very honest. A lot of women did break down and a lot of men were very candid with us – they felt safe and cosseted in this womb-like thing. But this series is more campaigning. It is more journalistic, but still hugely entertaining. It's a show we feel more proud of than anything we've done to date.

SUSANNAH CONSTANTINE, ***Guardian***

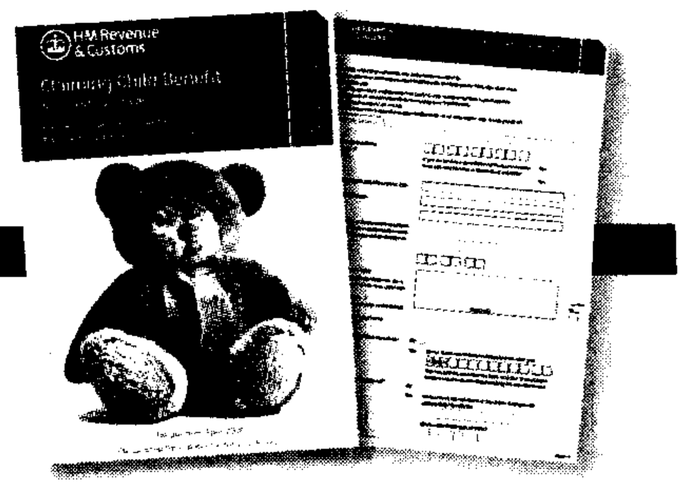
CONTRIBUTORS: Gillian Harrison, Chris Macrae, Mark Barrowcliffe, Tim Saville, Jon Cope, Cathal Rabbitte

£10 paid for all entries

IN THE BACK

CHILD BENEFIT SCANDAL

We're all in portal trouble



PAUL GRAY wasn't the first chairman of Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs (HMRC) to preside over an information scandal.

Last summer *Eye* 1164 revealed how officials and ministers had left open HMRC's internet "portal" for claiming tax credits for years, despite knowing that it breached the government's own security guidelines. At least £55m was lost to tax fraud as a result and 30,000 people had their identities stolen.

So who was accountable for that one? Step forward captain of industry-turned-HMRC chairman Sir David Varney. And what terrible fate awaited him for knowingly breaking the security rules at great cost? Was he banished from public service for good? Not quite. Gordon Brown quickly appointed him as his "transformational government" adviser promoting, ahem, greater data sharing across government. Great move!

● THE National Audit Office, to which the child benefit records were being sent, was quick to lay all the blame for the loss at HMRC's door, with public accounts commission chairman Edward Leigh acting as its parliamentary mouthpiece.

"It is clear that [NAO boss Sir John Bourn] specifically asked that all personal details, bank account details and all that sort of information should be removed before this was sent. That is the most important thing," he announced in the House after "Junketing John" (*Eyes passim ad nauseam*) had briefed him. Meanwhile the NAO told Alistair Darling, the chancellor, that "we requested the more sensitive elements to be removed..."

Two days later, after a spat between HMRC and the NAO, the released NAO-HMRC emails revealed that the NAO had said nothing of the sort. Far from insisting on sensitive data being removed, the NAO had merely asked for certain details to be removed "to make the files smaller". When they weren't, the NAO happily received the bigger files.

In the face of an immense public scandal the NAO, supposedly a guardian of public standards but desperate to spare its own already battered reputation, thus gave a thoroughly misleading account of its involvement in the fiasco. Perhaps its boss should go too. Oh, he already has!

● One depressing feature of the child benefit shambles was the way two large public bodies were unable to perform their core jobs themselves.

HMRC wouldn't remove certain details from the data before sending it as its IT supplier, EDS, would have charged too much. HMRC in fact has its own 310-strong audit service, one of whose members tells the *Eye* they could have done it very quickly and at no cost (but that would have breached the contract with EDS). In fact the specialists, whose main task is to scrutinise data from large companies' records, are twiddling their thumbs having been told to go easy on big business. HMRC for some reason wouldn't comment on the missed opportunity.

Meanwhile the NAO had sub-contracted *its* audit of the data to KPMG, perhaps because the NAO has the bizarre target of having to increase its use of consultants. As one reader has asked: what's the point of a National *Audit* Office that can't audit data?

PS: Has beans...

PwC chairman Kieron Poynter makes an interesting choice for the job of investigating HMRC's blunders. His main contribution to the tax system to date has been to screw it for all he can.

Under Poynter's seven-year stewardship, PwC has run a series of concerted challenges to British tax law aimed at fighting tax avoidance, corralling scores of multinationals into "group litigation orders" against the Revenue that have cost the taxpayer billions so far (see *Eyes passim*) and tied up extensive HMRC resources.

No hard feelings from Gordon though. Once again, when in trouble call... for a big beancounter!

NUMBER CRUNCHING

£2.5bn Amount overpaid in tax credits by HMRC in 2003/4

£2.5bn Amount lost to carousel fraud by HMRC in 2005/6

25m Number of people whose personal details were lost by HMRC in 2007

How HMRC works

WHO says senior managers at HMRC live with their heads up their backsides and aren't interested in getting the basics right? The following extract from the department's most recent board meeting shows what important topics occupy HMRC's finest minds:

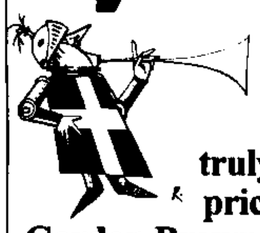
"Chris Hopson [strategy director] briefly outlined the purposes of the new Change and Capability function, distinguishing it from the Departmental Transformation Programme through its involvement in the Strategic Framework and broader changes across all parts of the Department.

"The strategic framework bridges the gap between the high level Departmental Ambition and directorate level planning. The Framework components are owned by ExCom members and sit across the organisational structures. The Board agreed that there needs to be alignment between the Framework and the committee structure, but highlighted the need to not lose sight of issues such as corporate responsibility which are not currently included in the Framework.

There is a misalignment in timing between setting DSOs [departmental strategic objectives] and strategic prioritisation, but options for flexibility in DSOs targets are being explored. There is a need to have clear and consistent links between the DSOs, Internal Departmental Targets, and the Framework, and all of these need to be hardwired into business as usual and the transformation programme..."

QINETIQ GIVEAWAY

Eye told you so



SO the National Audit Office (NAO) has finally made it official: taxpayers were well and truly screwed by the knockdown price tag agreed by then chancellor, Gordon Brown, for the sale of QinetiQ, once the Ministry of Defence's research arm.

The NAO should have read the *Eye* back in May 2001 when plans to sell off what was the old Defence Evaluation Research Agency (DERA) were first announced. The *Eye* warned then that Labour was resorting to the worst of the Tories' privatisation practices: revolving door recruitment, silly share options and fat cat salaries. We even questioned the decision to call in one of the Tories' favourite fat cat privatisers – the former civil servant Graham Love, now chief executive of, er, QinetiQ.

Love is of course one of those "top ten" managers who have made a fortune from the cheap sale of the skills of the country's leading research scientists and engineers. He saw his £110,000 investment soar to nearly £22m when QinetiQ floated last year.

The *Eye* also revealed how the original sale of a third of QinetiQ to the Carlysle Group for a mere £42m actually cost British taxpayers *more* in legal bills and consultants. To add insult to injury, QinetiQ then immediately started to flog off land and assets at a huge profit.

Love said last week that QinetiQ, was "doing the job, which is delivering value for shareholders". Once upon a time it did that for taxpayers.

Hoon he?

IF THE QinetiQ sell-off had happened more recently, there might well have been calls for a ministerial head. But who pushed through the sale that enriched the top 10 managers by more than £100m?

Junior defence minister with the QinetiQ portfolio Lewis (now Lord) Moonie wasn't happy with the timing of the sale so soon after the dot.com crash. But he was up against a Gordon Brown-run Treasury desperate for privatisation proceeds to rein in the defence budget. This left the man at the top, the then Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon, to come down on Gordon's side and sign off the deal.

And what's happened to Hoon? He's now one of the wise "greybeards" drafted into the Brown inner circle to counter the excesses of the young Turks with whom Gordon has (unsuccessfully) surrounded himself.

"It was a QoQ up"

It really is a Pauline

WHY are the Conservatives so reluctant to make political capital out of the QinetiQ scandal?

The Tory chairman of the Commons public accounts committee, Edward Leigh, rightly said taxpayers had been "short-changed" while senior managers had "won the jackpot". But the opposition frontbench doesn't seem keen to make a fuss.

Perhaps the muted response of David Cameron and shadow Defence Secretary Liam Fox may have something to do with the fact that their own shadow Security Minister, Pauline Neville-Jones, is one of the jackpot winners.

From 2001 to 2005 Neville-Jones was part-time non-executive chair of QinetiQ. The NAO report exposing the multimillion-pound gains of named QinetiQ executives also says the non-execs made £890,000 from a £100,000 investment between them.

The Tories have confirmed that Neville-Jones did "accept the offer to co-invest". In fact she made more than £350,000 from a £60,000 investment. With their shadow Security Minister personally profiting from a deal that short changed the defence budget, no wonder the Tories are keeping quiet.

OLYMPICS 2012

The race was fixed

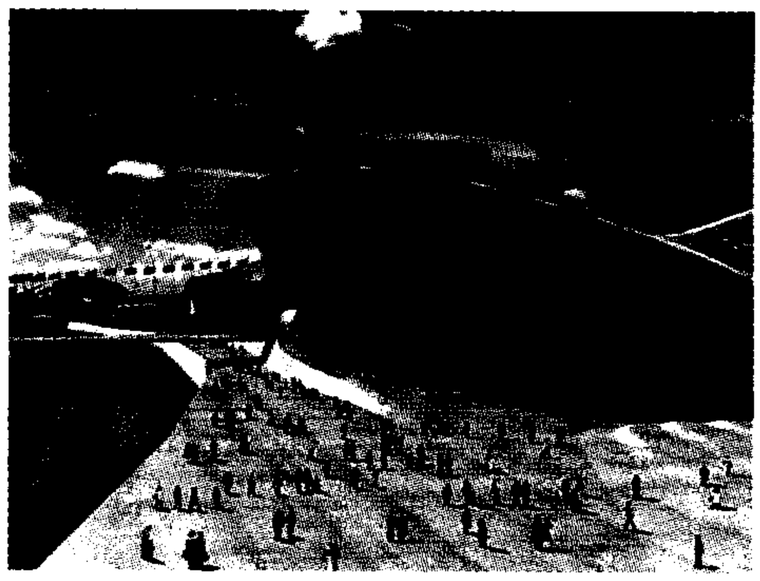
LAST MONTH's public accounts committee (PAC) hearing exposed how the Department of Culture Media and Sport broke clear rules and manipulated its costings for the 2012 Olympics in order to secure public approval and win the bid.

As first reported in *Eye* 1190, Treasury rules insist that big projects (like the Olympic games) make a contingency provision yet none was included in the UK bid. The contingency now stands at £2.7bn – or 75 percent on top of the building costs which officials publicly admit will be spent.

Veteran Labour MP Alan Williams had DCMS permanent secretary Jonathan Stephens squirming as he demanded to know how this had been left out when, right from the outset, the games' scale and fixed deadline demanded a high contingency. Stephens could only parrot that the bid was based on "expert advice".

When an exasperated Williams then asked a Treasury official present whether his department had pointed out its rules, Stephens tried to talk over him and prevent him giving the game away. Williams wasn't having that and made the Treasury man spill the beans. "The Treasury would have pointed to the guidance," the official mumbled.

Thus it is that the British parliament and the International Olympic Committee voted for a bid that at least two parts of government knew to be a massive lie. The PAC promises a highly critical report, but the chances of anybody answering for this dishonest waste of money remain remote.



ACTIS

False profits?

FOLLOWING the National Audit Office's report on QinetiQ (see above), the *Eye's* exposure of what looks like an even more scandalous privatisation has finally been noticed.

Days after the last *Eye* reported the wallet-bulging payouts at Actis, the outfit that manages UK aid in developing countries and was bought by its managers for a fraction of its value, the *Observer* quoted Lib Dem development spokeswoman Lynne Featherstone calling the sale "unbelievable incompetence" and an insider on the deal who thought the price had been "laughable".

The government, however, still won't come clean. Stephen Lovegrove (pictured), chief executive of the Shareholder Executive that manages the taxpayer's 40 percent residual stake in Actis, now writes to the *Eye* upholding a previous refusal to say how the sell-off price of £373,000 was calculated and disputing the latest value put on Actis by the NAO (between £182m and £535m).

The business, Lovegrove claims, "currently does not make a profit and is not forecast to make a significant profit". Eh? It has just filed accounts showing "profit for the financial period [2006] before members' profit share" of $18.2m.

Put to him that he must have made a mistake, Lovegrove insisted that partners' pay has to come out of this and that, once their shares are taken off "the distributable profits would be zero".

This would mean that other businesses structured as partnerships like, say, city law firms and beancounters KPMG, PwC *et al* whose partners scoop the pot every year, don't make anything and are thus worthless. Complete nonsense.

The Shareholder Executive's own accounts contradict Lovegrove's claims, declaring Actis highly profitable (£8m in 2005, the latest published). A partnership that makes its members such multi-million pound profits every year is in fact worth hundreds of times the £373k the Actis partners paid for 60 percent of it.

The secret valuation that threw up the pitiful price must presumably have been based on Lovegrove's odd logic. A candidate for an NAO investigation, surely? Sadly the auditors are again compromised. According to the development secretary responsible at the time, Hilary Benn, they were "kept informed" of the valuation process. So why did Auditor General Sir John Bourn wave through such a cushy deal for the bosses who were both buyers and sellers? It can't be related to all those lunches, can it?

Waving or drowning?

MORE silliness at the Olympic park in Stratford, east London, where the Aquatics Centre has been remodelled yet again – this time to provide "a leisure water element" once the swimming pool is handed over to the local council after the games.

The redesign to make the seating grandstands removable is the third time architect Zaha Hadid's plans for a wave-shaped building have been reworked. Tessa Jowell sent Olympic bosses back to the drawing board in December 2005 because of "simply unacceptable" cost rises. The size has been decreased twice to bring costs down, but surely someone had worked out what elements the "legacy" pool would need before commissioning the design in the first place. No?

Priced at £75m in the bid document, the cost of the Aquatic Centre is now said to be more like £200m, but with construction due to begin next year it looks like the company building it will have the Olympic Delivery Agency over a barrel. *Contract Journal* revealed in October that only one firm, Balfour Beatty, is even willing to put in a bid to construct the building. Other bidders Hochtief and Eiffel have already pulled out.

PRISON DEATH

Toxic regime

JAILED for a year for dangerous driving, Martin Green decided to use the time to turn his life around. The father of four from south Derbyshire embarked on a detoxification programme to end his seven-year addiction to heroin.

Eleven days later Green was found dead in his cell in Blakenhurst prison. At 6ft 2in, he weighed a mere 6st 10lbs, his skeletal frame resembling a "concentration camp victim".

Last month an inquest jury decided that inadequate medical care and serious failures in his treatment at the Redditch jail contributed to his death. Green, who had been vomiting repeatedly and asking to go to hospital, died from dehydration and starvation.

The inquest heard that the day before his death, a prison doctor had finally arranged for him to go to hospital to be placed on intravenous fluids. But staff shortages meant he wasn't taken. His emaciated body was found by the doctor next morning.

Green's needless death triggered a police investigation. Though the Crown Prosecution Service decided that no criminal charge should be brought, the inquest jury at Worcestershire coroner's court made it clear there had been serious failings from the moment Green arrived at the jail on 4 July 2002. Although it was noted that his health was generally poor because of his years of drug use, it had soon become apparent that he was not coping with detoxification and numerous medical staff noticed he was losing weight dramatically, vomiting, complaining of pains and unable to walk. Giving its verdict, the jury said: "It is evident that the prison regime took priority over the healthcare regime."

TEXTILE CONSERVATION

Stitch-up

THE Textile Conservation Centre (TCC) has preserved everything from Nelson's sails to Freddie Mercury's trousers, but can it save itself from the profit-driven University of Southampton?

The world-leading centre moved from its old labs at Hampton Court Palace to Southampton's Winchester School of Art campus in 1999 and became part of the university. But now Southampton says it is not financially viable and will have to close by September 2009.

Southampton claims it is willing to transfer the TCC to another institution and, handily, the University of Winchester would be willing to take it on – and gain in prestige as a result. However, Southampton is less willing to let go of the TCC's purpose-built £3.3m building, which contains vast double-height conservation labs and "the best-equipped analytical laboratories in any textile conservation facility in the world". Southampton says it will use the building for other academic purposes.

But the building was largely paid for from funds raised specifically for the TCC's 1999 move. Donations were made by livery companies such as the Clothworkers Company and the Merchant Taylors, and by charitable foundations. In 2001 the Arts and Humanities Research Board gave almost £1m to establish a new research centre, which was described at the time by Southampton's vice-chancellor Bill Wakeham as "a massive vote of confidence in the importance of the work of the Textile Conservation Centre".

Lib Dem candidate Martin Tod (lined up to replace Mark Oaten) is campaigning to keep the centre open. "I find it hard to see how they can justify hanging on to the building and wholly excluding it from any discussion," he said, adding that closing the only centre for post-graduate level textile conservation would affect museums and heritage across the country.

WEST YORKSHIRE POLICE

Knacker vs. Knacker

A POLICEMAN's attempts to clear his name of assault on a prisoner have unearthed evidence that some West Yorkshire police might prefer stayed buried.

Supporters of ex-PC Danny Major, jailed for 15 months, claim he was fitted up by fellow officers when he was jailed a year ago for assaulting a drunken prisoner, Sean Rimmington, in 2003. During a struggle to arrest Rimmington, a six foot four inch rugby player, Major was punched twice in the face. It was said that he lost his temper and kicked and punched the 18-year-old, who was later found injured and bloody in a cell at Bridewell police station in Leeds.

However, the picture now emerging raises serious questions about events at Bridewell that night: Rimmington wasn't the only prisoner claiming to have been assaulted; crucial CCTV footage is missing and computer hard drives have been destroyed; custody records were made up after the event. At Major's trial at Bradford Crown Court, the judge went so far as to describe the station as "not fit for purpose". Judge Roger Scott said: "We saw an unorganised, unsupervised rabble… a shambles. In my view it requires further investigation and possible charges against a large number of police officers."

So far no charges have been brought. But Major and his supporters are now studying CCTV tapes of movements inside Bridewell. One officer is seen making three trips into the cell corridors – where he should not have been – in the time between Rimmington being placed in the cell by Major and later found injured.

The tapes were disclosed halfway through the trial – too late to help his defence – and key pieces of footage are missing. Major claims they show inconsistencies in the accounts given by prosecution witnesses at his trial, and they now form part of his application to the Criminal Cases Review Commission. He has also received material from sympathetic former colleagues.

Major has always denied using excessive force and said Rimmington sustained only slight injuries during the arrest, so anything more serious must have happened afterwards. After a first trial when the jury failed to reach a verdict, Major again stood in the dock last year, fingered by two colleagues. Rimmington was so drunk he could not remember how his nose got broken, but he told paramedics he was beaten when he called for a drink in his cell. That tended to support Major, who never returned to the cell after locking Rimmington in. In addition, experts suggested that if his nose had been broken by a punch, it must have been delivered by a left handed person; Major is right handed.

The first of the two police witnesses was PC David Oldroyd, now the ex-husband of Adele Neale, the detention officer responsible for checking prisoners' conditions at Bridewell. Oldroyd's claim that he had seen Major kicking the prisoner hard in the chest while in the police van was disproved: Rimmington had no chest injury and Dr Tuckwell, the forensic medical examiner, said it could not have happened as claimed as Major was wearing steel-capped boots.

The second key police witness, Kevin Liston, swore he saw Major hit the prisoner as they got out of the van and then punch him in the face several times in the cell, leaving him gushing blood on the floor. The jury was told that this account was so different from Major's that one of the officer's must be lying.

In his summing up the judge outlined Major's previous good character and noted his commendation for one arrest made while off duty. The judge also referred to Liston, against whom three complaints of reprehensible conduct had been made and upheld in his short police career, although he had subsequently attained two commendations.

Despite the anomalies, a majority jury found Major guilty by ten to two. His hopes that CCTV footage would clear him of the assault outside the van were dashed when he learned the footage was missing. The Independent Police Complaints Commission has now taken up the case, but the prospects don't look too hopeful for Major: instead of calling in a different force, the IPCC has asked West Yorkshire to make its own inquiries.

SUMMER FLOODS

To Hull and back

DAYS after an independent report revealed Yorkshire Water's failure to act on years of warnings about pumping stations, the company told customers affected by this summer's floods in Hull that they will not be getting the £100 rebate usually given to customers whose homes are contaminated by flooding from sewers.

The company's charter says householders affected by flooding should get a £100 refund on their water bills. However, Yorkshire Water says it isn't obliged to make the payouts if floods are caused by "exceptional weather events".

The Independent Review Body (IRB), made up of Hull university academics and volunteers from the public and private sector in the region, was also critical of water industry watchdog Ofwat whose own "independent reporter" failed to uncover any of the problems the IRB highlighted, including a series of internal reports over 11 years warning about the reliability and condition of Bransholme pumping station.

"We have a grave concern that in scrutinising Yorkshire Water's performance through the June 2007 floods the independent reporter failed to raise any of the issues," says the IRB report, pointing out that what actually happened was that Ofwat asked Yorkshire Water itself to appoint and pay a reporter from a consultancy firm. The report warns of "the potential for reporters wishing for repeat business from a water company therefore not wishing to be too critical".

Yorkshire Water says it is "demonstrating its commitment to playing its part in protecting the city of Hull" by investing £16m in (belated) upgrades to two pumping stations and that "no system could have coped with the amount of rain that fell" in June. Hull city council is currently consulting lawyers about legal action to reclaim some of the vast cost of putting the city to rights.

Yorkshire Water changed hands for £3bn last week, after reporting a £184.8m profit for the six-month period ending on 30 September. Will new owners, the banking consortium Saltaire, offer anything to the people of Hull?

In the City

Northern wreckage

THE big (£25bn and counting) unanswered question about the Northern Wreck fiasco is: how much did the Bank of England and the Treasury expect to pay for rescuing the stricken building society when they agreed to provide first "unlimited support" and then a guarantee of all deposits back in mid-September?

The meeting of the Bank of England's board/court that agreed to the bailout took a reported 45 minutes. Governor Mervyn King's conversations with the Chancellor Alistair Darling took, it is presumed, somewhat longer. But at any time during these discussions, was any estimate given as to just how much support Northern Wreck might need to survive? Did the lunatics in charge of the Newcastle asylum provide any figures? How much of the £24bn in deposits was it estimated might be withdrawn? How much of the estimated £14bn in money market loans due by December was it said might not be replaceable due to the credit crunch?

What must be certain is that if the current situation – Bank support of at least £25bn and a Treasury guarantee of up to another £15bn – had been outlined as the likely outcome there would have been a very different response. If not from King then certainly from the Treasury, given the impact on public spending. Darling rejected a proposed rescue takeover from Lloyds TSB because it wanted a £30bn commercial loan from the Bank of England to do the deal. The Bank will be likely to have loaned at least that by the time Northern Wreck is either sold or nationalised early next year.

The perception is that both King and Darling (following in the straw man tradition associated with Labour's friends in the north, but this time fronting for his boss Gordon Brown rather than donor David Abrahams), not to mention the Fundamentally Supine Authority, all believed that the mere announcement of Bank of England support would prevent a run. When that failed, it was assumed that Darling's public statements would do the trick. Three days later, when it was realised that public confidence in politicians is so low that the response to calls not to panic was to do exactly that, and that a government guarantee of all deposits was all that would stop the run, the taxpayer had been put on the hook for whatever Northern Wreck was going to cost.

In their panic, King and Straw Man had handed the building society's directors, creditors and shareholders a blank chequebook, good for any amount.

Once in for one pound they were in for as many billions as it took. Just how wrong they were was quickly proved by the lines round the block outside Northern Wreck offices and then by the series of disclosures of how much the taxpayer was having to lend.

The initial word was that an unspecified facility had been made available but as at the time it had been announced none of it had yet been taken up. The "spin" was that because it was there, all was well and it might not be needed at all – especially at the supposedly penalty rates (though not as penal as would have been payable if Northern Wreck had been able to borrow commercially).

But within a week £3bn had been loaned. The next week another £5bn. Week three saw almost another £3bn go. After four weeks the taxpayer had loaned £13bn with the weekly drain running at £2-3bn. At least £10bn is estimated to have been pulled out by depositors. The current estimate is that eleven weeks of "unlimited support" have cost the taxpayer between £25bn and £30bn, with an expectation that the latter figure may be reached before end-December, and £35bn is possible in three months' time.

Which explains why a week on from its "preferred" bid, Straw Man is urging Northern Wreck to entertain rival bidders to the Virgin consortium who will offer to repay more to the taxpayer immediately – so far £15bn (against £11bn from Branson) seems the best offer - and promise to repay the rest within two or at most three years.

Despite their constant mantras about "seeing it through", not "running away" and "financial stability", it seems impossible to believe that Brown and Darling would have volunteered to end up where they are now – on the hook for probably over £40bn with a building society whose non-securitised mortgage book might not be worth that amount if house prices go the way they are forecast.

The Commons Treasury select committee should press for answers from Straw Man about just how much he was told the bill for saving Northern Wreck was going to cost on 13 September, when he agreed to the Bank of England rescue. In particular, he must explain:

- Was any figure for the likely support needed given, and if so by whom and on what basis?
- What were the best and worst estimates provided by Northern Wreck, the FSA or the Bank of England?
- How credible was the information provided by Northern Wreck on which FSA and Bank officials would have acted in part?
- Was the present situation envisaged as possible and acceptable? If not, why not?

The answers to those questions go to the heart of the issues of competence at Number 10.

So, too, will how Straw Man handle any Northern Wreck sale process to deliver on his promise to safeguard the taxpayer? That is the key issue, not protecting shareholders – to whom the government has no duty despite all the protests. Taxpayers were never offered any of the profits or dividends received by shareholders on the way up. Investors, like City bankers, are always against state intervention until handouts are required.

Watch the Beardie

The Virgin bid, like so much with the bearded wonder, flatters to deceive. But desperate politicians are easy meat for a convincing salesman like Richard Branson who has credibility among the non-financially sophisticated public. Labour and Northern Wreck seemed initially blinded by the Branson/Virgin brand. But City experts and Branson watchers point to his limited finance sector track record plus the typically high price and minnow status of Virgin Money, which is to be injected as part of the deal. Then there is Branson's spotty record in delivering on his promises for customers and investors.

None other than private equity veteran Jon Moulton – the man Labour rejected to save MG Rover (RIP), preferring self-enriching incompetents – quickly pointed out on the BBC's *Today* programme that Branson's promised £200m investment bought control of £100bn plus in assets, so the gearing was enormous. Unlike the taxpayer, Branson has the prospect of big rewards.

Branson was quick to announce that he would not be taking any dividends before the taxpayer was repaid. Private equity is not about dividends. It is about capital gains. By the time the taxpayer was out, Branson would be estimated to have made many times his £200m – all with the taxpayer's support. Meanwhile Northern Wreck would have also been paying the philanthropic billionaire millions a year to use the Virgin name.

What would the taxpayer get back in comparison with the capital profits estimated for Branson and his partners? Well, an extra 1 to 2 percent above the 5.75 percent base rate on all those billions. But what about a share of the upside action in the value of the building society they bailed out – a point stressed by Moulton and emphasised by the deal done the day the Virgin bid was disclosed between US giant Citigroup and the Abu Dhabi Investment Agency?

Citi has been hit hard – up to $11bn – by the sub-prime crisis. It is borrowing $7.5bn from the Gulf state sovereign fund but at 11 percent – much more than Northern Wreck or its rescuers would pay the Bank – and ADIA has the right to convert the loan into Citi shares in two to four years, giving it a stake of under 5 percent at prices two to eight dollars above the depressed stock market level when the deal was announced last week. There are no proposals to provide the taxpayer with any slice of the Northern Wreck upside which it is making entirely possible. Only nationalisation and a later privatisation would do that.

Then there is the little matter of tax. The Virgin empire is controlled offshore and so the capital profit from "saving" Northern Wreck and selling it on (the likely plan in order to realise the gain) could probably be free of UK tax. Branson's American partners, Wilbur Ross and insurers AIG, plus Hong Kong-based Victor Chu, will also probably legally operate outside the UK tax net. So, too, do rival US bidders JC Flowers and Cerberus Capital.

The battle for Northern Wreck also threatens embarrassment for Brown and Labour from a different quarter. Hedge funds run by RAB Capital and SRM Global Fund are threatening to block any sale which does not allow them to recoup some of their losses as shareholders. RAB has bought

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almost 7 percent, SRM has another 9 percent.

A big investor in both RAB shares (some 7 percent bought for £19m) and its Special Situations fund (another $200m) which has bought into Northern Wreck, is Labour donor Lakshmi Mittal, who has given the party more than £4m. RAB is pressing for a better deal than that offered by Branson to shareholders. That would help RAB investor Mittal, but not his business associate Wilbur Ross, who sold him International Steel Group in 2005 for a tenfold profit and sits on the ArcelorMittal board.

The presence of Ross in the Virgin consortium could also be a minus for Labour. Described as a "vulture investor" and the "king of bankruptcy", descriptions he rejects, Ross has become a billionaire from, as he puts it, helping "dying companies survive and grow". "He has a very good eye for value," says corporate raider Carl Icahn. Seven years ago Ross walked away from a deal to rescue the failed Tokyo Sowa Bank when the Japanese government refused to put in more taxpayers' money to cover loan losses to what it considered an unacceptable level. Ross has been described as suggesting that only the prospect of overpaying brings him remorse – worth remembering at the Treasury, like the events at Tokyo Sowa Bank.

Workers and unions at the steel, textile and coal companies Ross has bought and usually sold on are often less than complementary. In order to make his deals work Ross has to cut costs, which often means pensions and health care benefits. "If you have to get him to open his wallet, moths will fly out," declared Leo Gerard, president of the US steel workers union. Gerard also said the United Steelworkers of America union and Ross had a deal after he created ISG out of several bankrupt companies. Ross was "in for the long term". That was July 2003. In 2004, Ross announced he had sold out to Mittal for $4.5bn. That was then, this was now.

Ross's non-union company International Coal Group – again formed from bundling together bankrupt or ailing mining companies – came in for criticism after a fatal explosion at the Sago Mine in West Virginia killed 12 miners in January 2006. Ross was involved as first an investor and then, from 2005, ICG owned Sago. The Sago safety record was poor and was criticised by mine inspectors. ICG was not blamed for the accident in the official report this year, but it is being sued by relatives of the dead miners and the sole survivor. The case is due to go to trial next year. ICG maintains it had improved safety at the mine and denies responsibility for the accident.

Ross, like Branson and rival private equity players Christopher Flowers (who made a more than ten-fold profit in 2003, three years after bailing out Japan's Long-Term Credit Bank), Luqman Arnold and the Cerberus crew, are in Northern Wreck to make money at the taxpayer's expense, not to do any favours for Labour, or probably employees, never mind shareholders. If it works they will sell on at a big profit.

But what happens if, after a sale goes through leaving the taxpayer and the Treasury still on the hook, a house-price collapse leaves Northern Wreck's new owners unable to repay the remaining £10bn plus on the timescale agreed? How then would Straw Man safeguard the taxpayer's interest?

Any private sale is, for the taxpayer, likely to be heads you lose, tails I win.

'Slicker'

EYE CROSSWORD 354

by Cyclops

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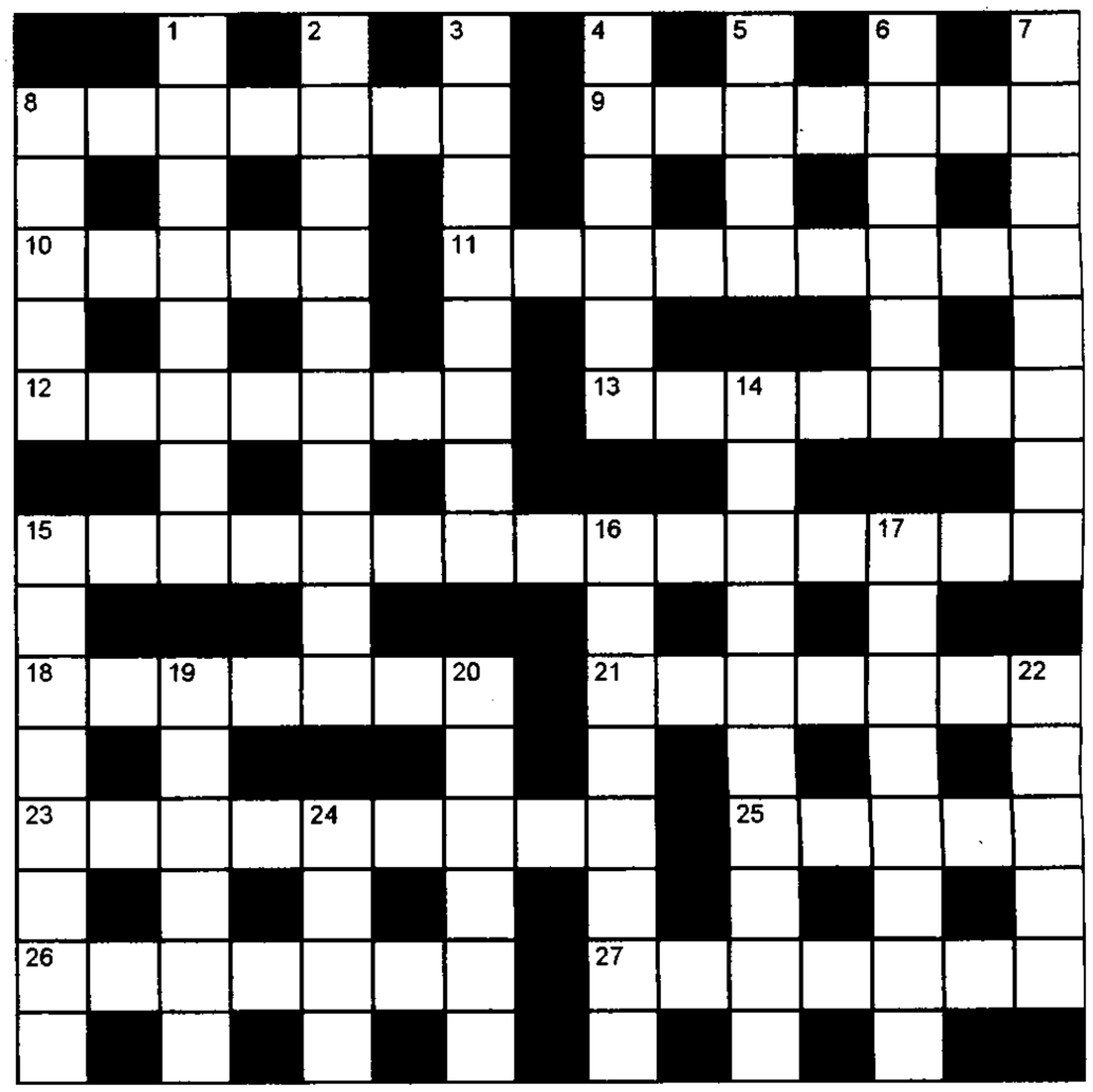


ACROSS

8/21 Straddle Roger? (3,4,3,4)

9 One bishop, before the watershed, gets to remove bits of the text (7)

10 Sulphur applied to muscles: a means of correcting the frequent masturbator's problem? (5)

11 Pisspoor surgeon grabs credit for sponging bum (9)

12 Bloke acquiring new car's taking the piss (7)

13 Unearthly right-wing politician of very high standing in California? (7)

15 Long time at Westminster makes one feeble-sounding, being part of Gordon Brown's world (1,4,2,8)

18 Peer takes the piss out of this immersion of Liberals' leader in worse surroundings (7)

21 See 8ac.

23 Maybe a no. 10 party nut (9)

25 A couple of tits see the point in Big Bang (5)

26 Create mayhem about Times shit (7)

27 Albert possibly wants political party put in order (7)

DOWN

1 Patriotic figure's way to get stuffed without drug (2,6)

2 Surprised, try and hide hard drug in sack (10)

3 Hack and crush male member in sport (8)

4 More of a blonde mop should crown Brenda (6)

5 Hurd understood a tongue inside (4)

6 A far from PC European squeezes middle of tit slowly (6)

7 The islands for the more dominant partners of gay marriages? (8)

8 Mother exits massage in disarray, things in the air (5)

14 A king bound to be implicated in Lord Lucan action? (5,1,4)

15 Dubya, put in same predicament, attacks (8)

16 Picture student lying in vomit – an environmental hazard! (3,5)

17 So vain, unhinged, after being elected – a Hitler-type thing? (8)

19 Cook's first affair (female abandoned) rocked the land (6)

20 President's misplaced anger stifling Afghanistan's leader (6)

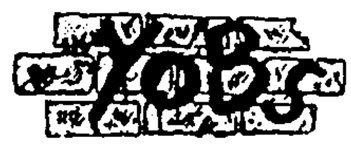
22 Blinking quick sex – send off cash! (5)

24 Troubles and rows of Jonathan Ross? (4)

Crossword 353 winner: JOHN HUGHES

ACROSS: 8 Inform 9 Steroids 10/24 A load of old codswallop 11 None 12 Uterus 13 Bollocks 14 David Miliband 18 Fancy man 21 Ambush 23 Brno 26 Aptitude 27 Adroit.

DOWN: 1 Inflated 2 Hot air 3 Embossed 4 Oslo 5 Feudal 6/25 Going on a diet 7 Gdansk 13 Brian 15 Victoria 16 In a sweat 17 Despotic 19 Abrupt 20 Muck up 22 Bolero.



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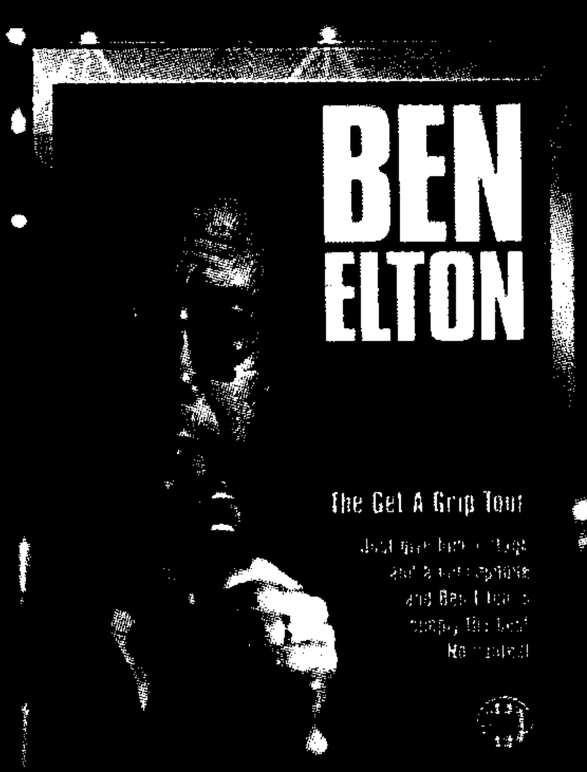

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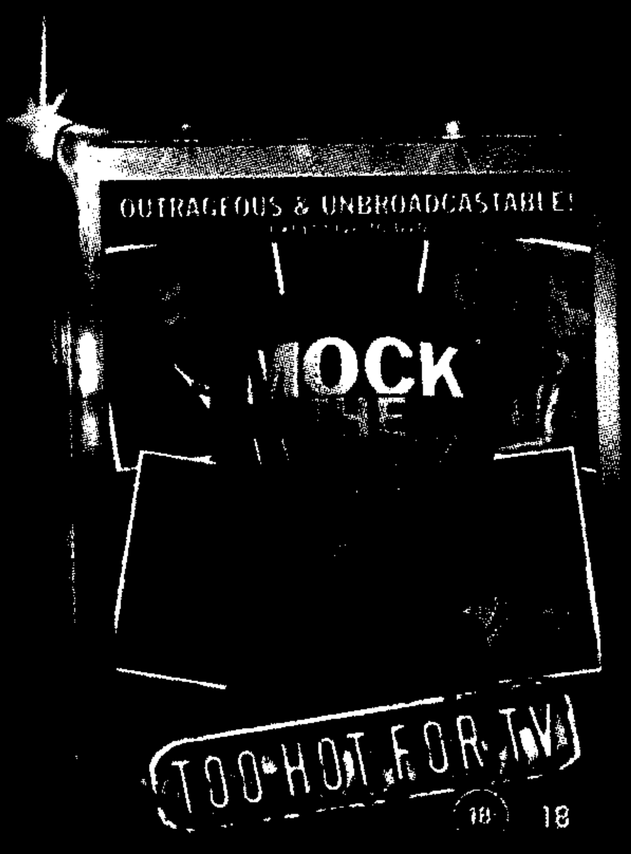

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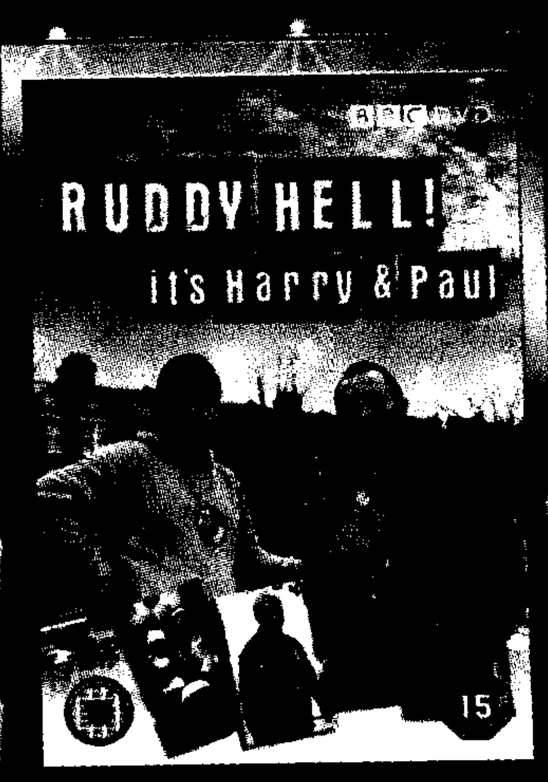

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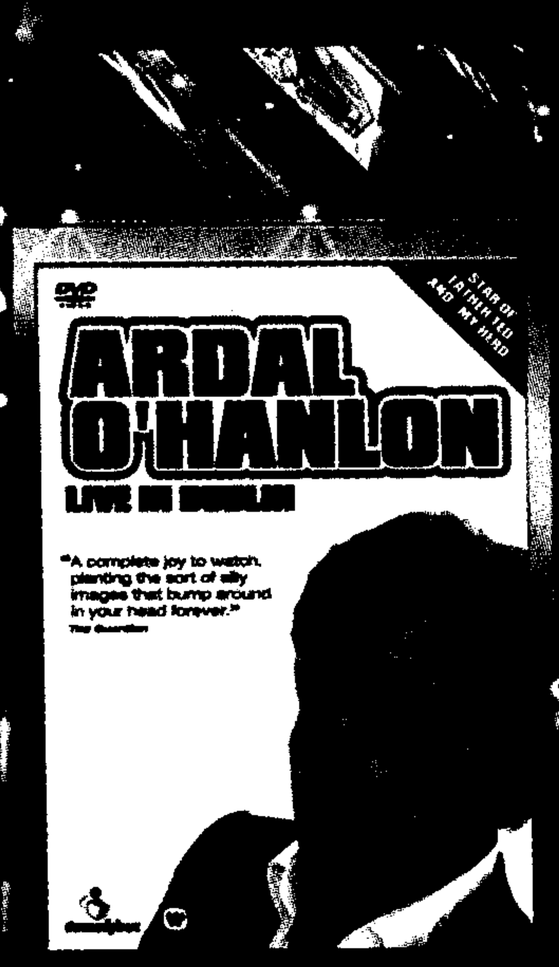
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DESPERATELY NEED £40,000 to get me out of debt. Please help. S/C: 11-01-66. A/C: 01375354.

MALE, 45, needs help with getting out: current situation of absolute desperation. I have no money. Tel: 01225 789 764.

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CAN YOU HELP MY FRIEND? Kind lady who helped many, now ill, OAP without a pension, about to lose everything. Very grateful for any help. S/C: 16-00-84. A/C: 15112255.

PLEASE HELP. I'm poor. Need money. u2go2me@aol.com

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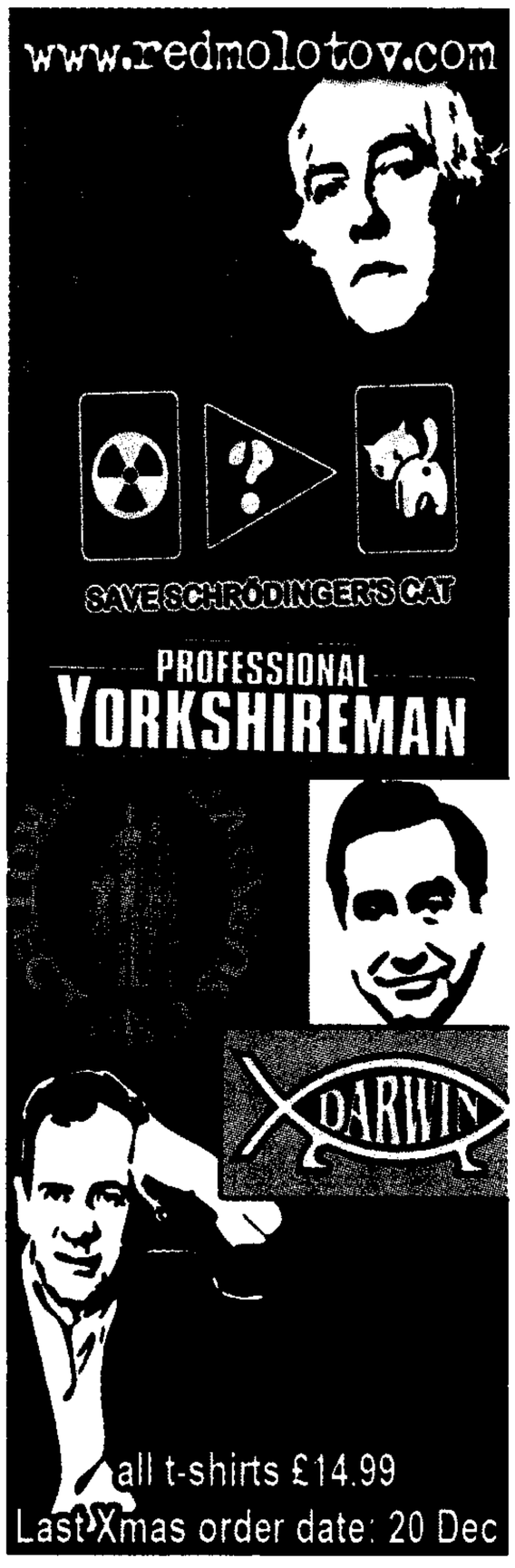

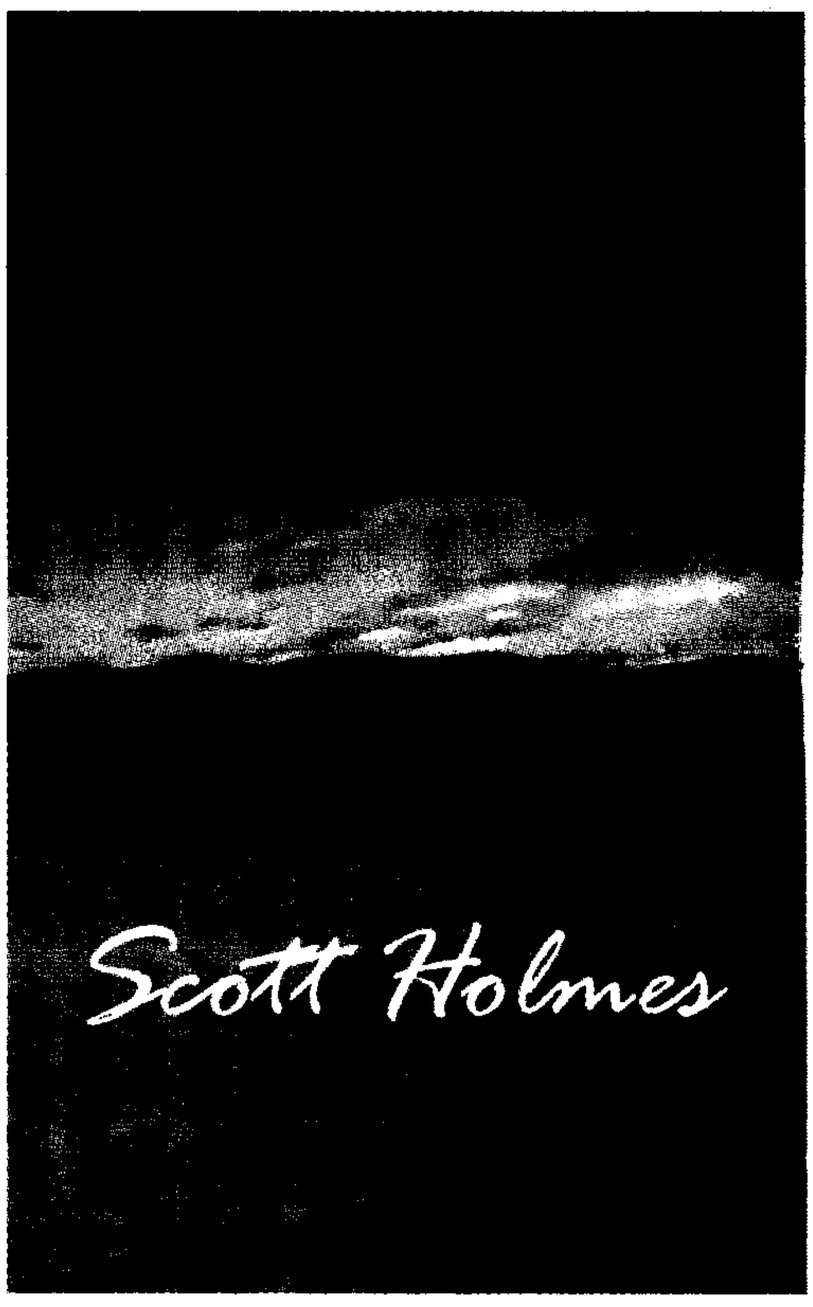

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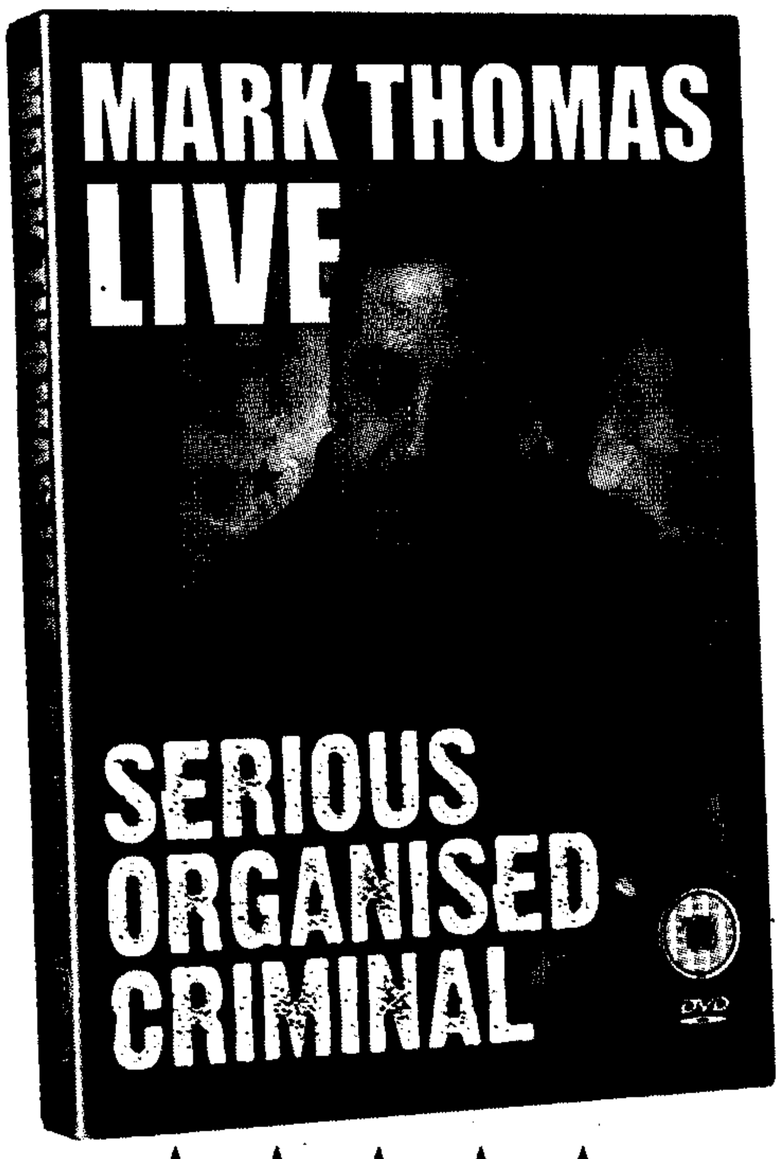

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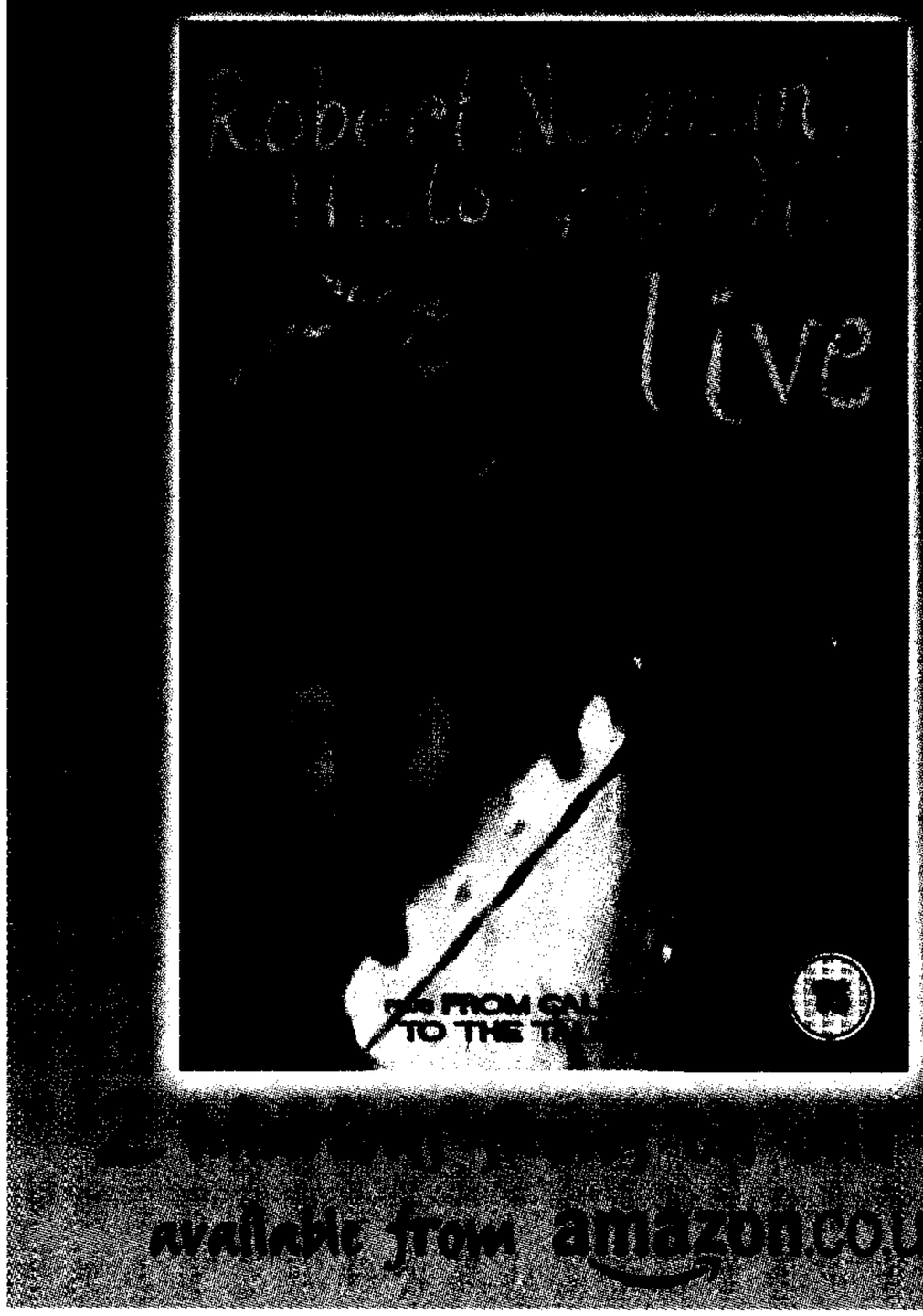

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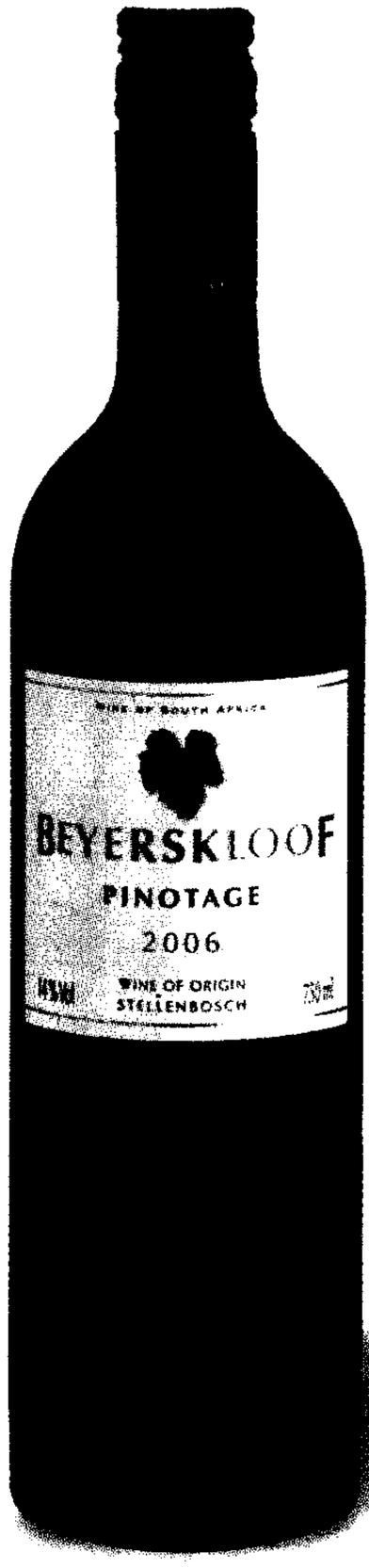

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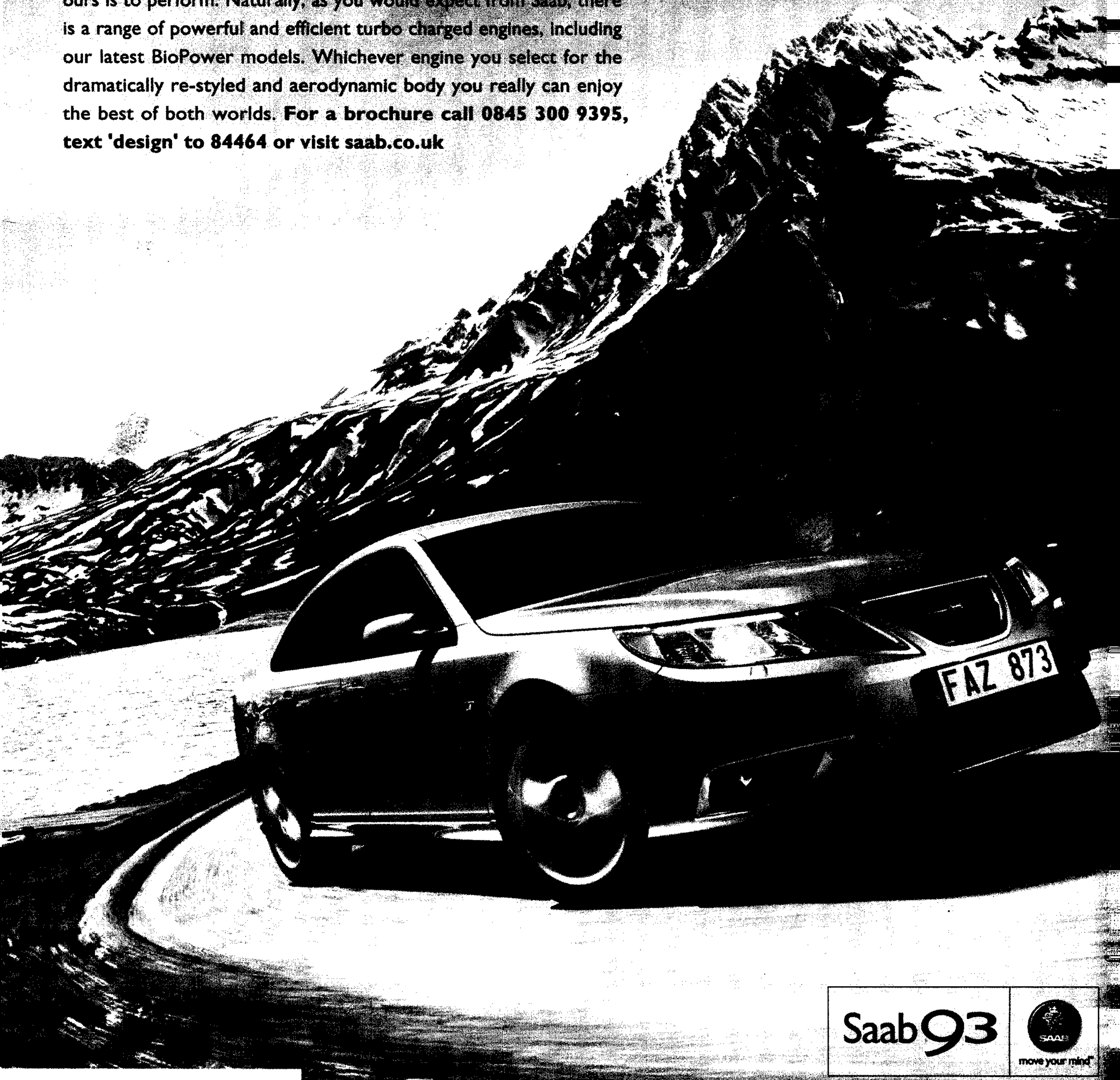

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